

異世界料理道

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VOLUME
6

Cooking with
wild game.



Cooking with Wild Game 異世界料理道

Volume 6

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「私には、とても美味いと思えた。

だから、自分の信じた道を進みたい。

……それを皆に賛同してもらえたら、嬉しく思う」

しん——と、祭祀堂の中が静まりかえっていた。
スン家も、その眷族も、ルウ家も、その眷族も——

かまど番をつとめた女衆も、
小さな氏族の家長たちも、

全員が奇妙な感じに息をひそめ——
そして、にわかに静寂が破られた。

「……フオウの家は、ファの家長に賛同する」

異世界料理道

Cooking with wild game.

VOLUME
6



いざ出陣!!

スン家で行われる 族長会議へ



血まみれの足が、視界に入った。

血まみれの腰。

血まみれの腹。

血まみれの腕。

血まみれの胸。

血まみれの首。

血まみれの顔。

一糸まとわぬ裸身を血まみれにした

ヤミルⅡスンが、そこに立っていた。

「……わたしの婿になって、スン家を救って……？」

「……それが嫌なら、一緒に滅んで……？」



Prologue - The Busy Day Off

It was the next morning after finishing our ten days of business in the Post Station Town.

Inside my temporary lodging inside the Wu clan village, I stared mesmerizingly at the two items of kitchenware I bought yesterday.

Yesterday, I bought a Semu kitchen knife and a Jaguar-made steel griddle.

This was a vegetable cutting knife, about 20 cm in length and 8 cm wide. It was a thin single-edged blade, which didn't have any curvature like utility kitchen knives or meat-cutting knife. The body of the blade was rectangular instead. It had an appearance similar to Usaba bocho¹ which I was familiar with.

As the blade was straight, it closed tightly with the chopping board, making it ideal for cutting vegetables. However, sharpening it required special care as it was a single-edged knife, so I had to be careful. The blade was thin and cracked easily, but it was extremely sharp, worthy of its price of 18 white copper plates.

Next was the steel griddle.

It hailed from Jaguar renowned for its steel products. I heard that most of the steel products sold in Genos came from Jaguar.

The griddle was 70 cm wide, 50 cm long and 6 mm thick. The four edges of the griddle protruded 3 cm up, and there were no other decorations aside from the handles on either sides. The simple and manly design was mesmerizing.

I already did a griddle seasoning process² yesterday which was heating up the griddle and then smearing oil on it. This made the griddle surface shiny and smooth.

I had stayed in Forest's Edge for almost half a month. During this time, I grilled and roasted food by using a pot. Now that I had the griddle, it would be much more convenient. The efficiency in poitan and meat patty would also improve.

The pot I usually used was about 1 cm thick and weighed more than 30 kg. Compared to that, the griddle was only about 12 or 13 kg, making it more portable too.

Furthermore, the griddle being thinner meant it had better heat conductivity. It wasn't as thick as the iron pot, but the griddle was already plenty thick. (The iron pot was actually incredibly thick in the first place). Given the practicality of using this griddle, I could cook a wider variety of food too. I couldn't stop smiling at the thought of that.

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Usaba_b%C5%8Dch%C5%8D

2 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seasoning_\(cookware\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seasoning_(cookware))

The Semu kitchen knife that was as elegant as decoration and the incredibly practical Jaguar griddle. I ogled at these two items of kitchenware basking under the sun.

「... What are you doing, Asuta?」

Ai Fa who went to the water source early in the morning came back to the room, and I turned to look at her.

「Hi, you are back so early. How's your left arm?」

「It doesn't hurt at all, but it had grown weaker. It's fine if my opponent is human, but I feel uneasy about taking on kiba with my condition like this.」

Ai Fa flexed her left arm that could finally move freely after six days. Ai Fa dislocated her elbow while hunting and was recuperating.

「My strength isn't back yet, so my bones might shift out-of-place if I pushed myself. I will need to observe it for a few more days... Asuta, what were you doing?」

「I'm not doing anything, just zoning out and admiring the kitchenware I bought yesterday.」

「... Hmm?」

Ai Fa tilted her head slightly, then came over and sat beside me.

Her slightly damp blonde hair was tied into a complicated pattern like last time. Tying her hair up simply to the side had its charms, but a hairstyle in which it was easy to move suited Ai Fa the best after all.

「When I was cleansing myself and washing the utensils, were you just sitting here?」

「That's right. This is the first kitchenware I bought with my own money, and I can't get enough of it.」

My face was probably filled with love like a grandfather receiving his first newborn grandchild.

Ai Fa frowned a little sadly.

「Asuta, you...」

「Yes?」

「No, it's nothing.」

「What's the matter? It's rare for you to be hesitant to speak, Ai Fa.」

「Nah, it's fine.」

I turned my body towards Ai Fa.

「There's definitely something. I'm curious. If you have anything on your mind, don't hold back and tell me.」

「Even if we are a family, we can't ignore social courtesy. That's why it's nothing.」

「No, you are making me even more curious! Didn't we talk about this before? We shouldn't keep anything from each other. Our thinking and emotions are a little different, so we need to be honest with each other about everything in order to understand one another better.」

After my passionate speech, the sorrow on Ai Fa's face grew even deeper.

「It's nothing that complicated. I just... don't want to upset you.」

「It will be fine. Didn't you say something like this? 『If I feel uncomfortable, I will just beat you up, so there is no need to hide how you feel』.」

「... Do you want to beat me up?」

「I wouldn't dare do something so scary.」

「... Won't you get mad?」

「If your words correspond to your beliefs, I will debate with you until I am satisfied with the conclusion.」

「I see. I understand, your argument makes more sense.」

Ai Fa sat on the floor cross-legged, straightened her back, and looked at me with a serious face.

「I just thought that you were a bit disgusting.」

「.....」

「Are you mad?」

「No, not at all.」

I almost broke down in tears though.

「Anyway, your eyes were filled with love when you were looking at these tools made from steel and wood, as if you were looking at a human. That felt a little disgusting...」

「Ah, I understand very clearly, so no need to hit me when I'm down...」

「I see... Are you mad?」

「No, I'm not mad at all.」

「Okay.」 Ai Fa nodded.

She had an innocent smile on her face.

「I should say what I really think after all. I feel much better now, Asuta.」

「That's great.」 : I said with a vague smile.

If my sorrow could cheer Ai Fa up, then our fortunes and misfortunes would be balanced, and the world would be able to operate normally.

「You have cheered up a lot too. Your face looked so sour last night.」

「Ah, I have just gotten over it. I need to take care of the work before me in order to settle the troublesome matters.」

The work before me... Three days later, we will tend to the hearth for the house head conference held at the Tsun clan. We will have a seminar today to prepare for that.

The Tsun clan was the chief clan of Forest's Edge and was also infamous here.

They monopolized the money granted by Genos, indulged in leisure all day, did their jobs as hunters sloppily, and disturbed the peace in the Post Station Town. On top of that, they were also colluding with the nobles of Genos, so the crimes they committed in the Post Station Town went unpunished. These examples made it hard to imagine that they were the chief clan of the pure and righteous Forest's Edge denizens.

Milano Mast also told me one shocking matter.

Simply put, a denizen of Forest's Edge murdered Milano Mast's brother-in-law who was also his good friend, but the criminal wasn't brought to justice. Milano Mast's harsh criticism against the denizens of Forest's Edge felt unbelievable.

I didn't have any solid evidence that the criminal was a member of the Tsun clan.

However, my suspicion of the Tsun clan was steadily increasing.

The only thing I could do was to prepare as much as possible for the house head conference.

「Well then, I will visit the water source. Today will be a busy day too.」

「Yes. Will you be instructing the women in cooking?」

「That's right. Additionally, I have to prepare for the stall tomorrow. And I will need to decide on a dish for the inn. Looks like I'll be busy the entire day.」

「... I'm envious.」

Ai Fa pouted a little.

「I can only forage for firewood. My health is neither too good nor too bad, so it feels terrible that I can't enter the forest.」

「Hey, hey, don't get reckless now, alright? 」

I warned her worriedly, and Ai Fa pouted even more.

「You think I'm that retarded? I will rest when it is time to rest. This is necessary for hunters. 」

「Ah, sorry. You looked really unhappy about it though. 」

「I might be unhappy... but I will only show this face to you, so stop complaining. 」

I hoped Ai Fa could open her heart to more people— but even so, I felt as if my heart was going to explode from joy when I heard her saying that.

「... It's so early in the morning, but thank you very much. 」

「Why do you need to thank me? 」

「N-No, it's nothing! Why then, I will go wash up before I start work. 」

The day off that was just as busy as a normal business day has begun.

「Alright then, we are holding this seminar for the sake of tending to the hearth during the house head conference. I have already planned the workflow for that day. 」

There were two seminars, one in the morning and another in the evening.

If too many people gathered at one time, I wouldn't be able to attend to them all. I didn't want to ask all the Lutim house to come over early in the morning, hence the arrangement.

There would be eight women assisting me in tending to the hearth during the house head conference.

The roster was the following. The four helpers from the Wu clan were Vena Wu, Leina Wu, and Lala Wu. The branch house dispatched two assistants, Shela Wu and Tali Wu. The reinforcements from the Lutim main house were Ema Min Lutim and Molun Lutim.

Tali Wu was Shela Wu's mother. On the day of the house head conference, this strong pair of mother and daughter will be away from the house, so Shin Wu's place would be left unattended. Women from the other branch houses would go over and help instead. After the Lutim house banquet, not just Shela Wu, even Tali Wu's culinary skill improved remarkably. That was the reason Mia Lei Wu recommended them strongly.

I met Molun Lutim once before. She was Ema Min Lutim's sister-in-law— Kaslan Lutim's sister and Dan Lutim's daughter. She had a similar appearance to her father and was a charming and energetic girl.

Right now, five of the helpers had gathered.

They were three sisters of the Wu main house, Mama Mia Lei, and Shela Wu.

As Mama Mia Lei and Shela Wu would be the team leaders of this elite group, I requested for them to attend both sessions of the seminar. I looked at the five reliable figures and continued:

「Aside from the cooking, we have to let the women of the Tsun clan learn these cooking techniques. On the day of the house head conference, I hope for everyone to show as much as possible, and let the Tsun clan women do the actual cooking as much as possible. Like what I did the second time I tended to the Wu clan hearth.」

「Ah, you mean the pre-wedding celebration for the Lutim house wedding where you made me cook the steak for the house head to eat? We were the ones who did the actual cooking that time.」

Mama Mia Lei nodded vigorously on behalf of the others. She sure was lively today.

「But the number of guests this time is about the same as during the Lutim house wedding, right? Will that actually work?」

「Don't worry, the menu won't be as sumptuous as in the wedding, and we won't need to worry about food distribution either... I'm planning for four dishes this time, which are 『Myam-roasted meat』, kiba steak, grilled poitan, and aria meat soup.」

「Huh? Are we not adding other vegetables to the meat soup?」

Lala Wu asked.

「Yes, we need to subtract the ingredient cost from the amount they are paying us. Aside from aria and poitan, we will also be using myam and fruit wine. Hence, I have decided to make the menu simpler.」

This was the agreement I made with Yamiel Tsun.

On top of that, the Tsun clan didn't need to pay directly for the hearth caretaking— the 40 sets of kiba tusks and horns would be collected from the house heads attending that conference.

That sounded infuriating, but we had our own circumstances too and didn't complain too much.

We wanted to use this chance to let the denizens of Forest's Edge understand the importance of 「delicious food」 and a 「prosperous life」.

No matter what the Tsun clan were planning, our viewpoints were right. We wanted to emphasize this point.

「Besides, if we serve food that takes too much effort, they would think that the food being delicious is a given. I think it will be more convincing if we let them taste dishes that can be easily prepared.」

「Hmm~ you have given it much thought.」

Lala Wu shrugged as if she was saying: 「Do what you want.」

I smiled at her, then continued with my briefing.

「I plan to start with making grilled poitan on that day, then the kiba meat soup followed by other meat dishes. I don't want to prepare different dishes at the same time, so we will do the dishes one by one. The grilled poitan and meat soup shouldn't be a problem. As for the meat dishes, I hope everyone can practice until you are able to instruct the women of the Tsun clan by yourself.」

I looked at Shela Wu who was standing quietly by the side.

「Shela Wu, this doesn't concern the house head conference, but I hope you can finish the 『Myam-roasted meat』 by yourself after the special training today.」

「Ehh...? But why?」

「We will be opening for business in the Post Station Town again tomorrow. When I'm not around, I hope I can leave the 『Myam-roasted meat』 stall to you.」

Two days after the house head conference, which was the 12th of the Blue Month, I will be providing dinner for the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》.

However, I didn't have enough time.

If I started the preparation work for the inn after closing shop, it would delay my return trip significantly. I wouldn't have enough time to prepare the meals for the next day in that case.

「Therefore, at noon when the 『Kiba burgers』 sell out, I will head to the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》 to prepare their meals. During this period, I hope you can tend to the 『Myam-roasted meat』 stall.」

「... Can I do it? Controlling the heat is important when cooking 『Myam-roasted meat』, correct?」

「That's right. If you overcook it, the meat will be too tough. If you marinate it too long, the taste will be too strong. I think you can do it after practicing for a few days.」

「Is that true...?」

「Yes. Since I will be increasing your workload, your pay will double too. I have already discussed this with Mia Lei Wu.」

Shela Wu looked shocked and turned her head towards Mama Mia Lei. Mama Mia Lei ruffled Lala Wu hair with a smug smile.

「I asked Lala and Vena for their opinion, and they both agreed that only you can accomplish this, so I have decided to leave this to you. After all, they are not very good at tending to the hearth.」

「Shut up, Shela Wu is the one who is too good! We can't replicate Asuta's cooking completely!」

「That's right... I want to try too, but I lack the conviction to roast the meat at the stall.」

When the two girls were answering, the light of admiration was flickering in their eyes.

At this moment, the person who had been quiet all this time finally spoke:

「Mama Mia Lei, I think of myself as a capable hearth caretaker too... Will the ones going to town tomorrow still be Vena-nee and Lala?」

It was the second daughter Leina Wu.

Leina Wu held her hands in front of her breasts and looked at her mother with pleading eyes.

Mama Mia Lei showed a troubled smile.

「The clan head was the one who picked Vena at first. If both Vena and you are away, it will affect the chores at home, right...? And before we figure out the Tsun clan's scheme, I think we should let Vena stay with Asuta. Your sister is the best at dealing with others.」

「But...」

「For example, if a man in a drunken stupor from the Tsun clan were to look for trouble at the stall, Vena could deal with him smoothly, right? After the decision to tend to the hearth at the house head conference we are confident that the Tsun clan won't lay their hands on Asuta. However, the clan head might change his mind. Bear with it before that.」

「... I understand.」

Leina Wu puffed her cheeks slightly.

Vena Wu had a complicated expression on her face. She turned her head to the side and fidgeted with her chestnut hair.

And then Shela Wu looked at me with a face of determination.

「I understand. Asuta, I hope to meet your expectation to repay your trust in me. I will be in your care.」

「Thank you... Let's start the practice then.」

The morning practice seminar ended without any incident.

After two hours, the session ended. I left the stove room and stretched my arms.

Rimee Wu and Grandma Ditto Min were sunning pico leaves and chopping wood.

「Hi, Rimee Wu, is Ai Fa still not back?」

「Yes. But she should be returning soon.」

Ai Fa went to the fringe of the forest to forage for firewood.

There was still some time before noon. I was wondering what to do during this time when an unexpected person came to me.

It was the eldest son of the Wu main house, Jiza Wu.

「Asuta, if you are free now, can I talk with you?」

「Do you — want to talk with me?」

I had not seen Jiza Wu around lately, but he suddenly came to me at this moment. Honestly, I didn't think it was anything good.

Mama Mia Lei followed me out of the stove room, and she looked at the eldest son of the Wu main house a little suspiciously.

「Jiza, you actually have something to discuss with Asuta, what a surprise... Are you unhappy with the decision made by the clan head?」

「The clan head's decision is absolute. Do you think I will violate this principle as the eldest son?」

His face remained warm and gentle.

When his slit-like eyes met Mama Mia Lei's gaze, Mama Mia Lei sighed gently.

「Both you and Asuta still have work to do, don't stress each other out.」

「Alright.」

Jiza Wu nodded and walked to the side of the house.

My only option was to follow.

「...Asuta, it's been a long time since we last had a proper chat.」

「That's right, since the morning of the Lutim house wedding banquet, we had not spoken at all.」

「Less than twenty days... In such a short period of time, the situation around us had changed drastically.」

Jiza Wu stopped and turned towards me.

He wasn't wearing his cape or his blades, and only had simple clothes and a sash around his waist.

However, Jiza Wu was buffed and could take me down easily without any blades. When confronting him, I had to be as careful, as if facing a member of the Tsun clan.

「You are now the central figure in Forest's Edge. Whenever you act, the future of Forest's Edge changes too... I can sense this very strongly.」

「That's not true. I know that many of the incidents were caused by me— but for better or worse, I can't do anything with my powers alone. If not for the help of Ai Fa, Kaslan Lutim, and Donda Wu, I couldn't be involved in the future of Forest's Edge at all.」

「Who knows? If you weren't here, things wouldn't have turned out this way.」

A formless pressure as heavy as a mountain assaulted me.

This was the lead-like pressure that the Wu clan siblings feared so deeply.

「You have a point. But I think the other people also wield similar influence. If not for Ai Fa, Kaslan Lutim or Donda Wu, the situation would be completely different. That's how the world is.」

「...Asuta, you have changed.」

Jiza Wu's voice became deeper.

「You were meeker in the past. You didn't know what kind of existence you were and didn't try to wield your power dangerously in a reckless manner.」

「I see...」

「However, you have grasped your own capabilities and are attempting to influence Forest's Edge with your powers.」

Was it just my imagination? Jiza Wu's bulky body looked even more buffed now.

The pressure was gradually increasing.

「You are dangerous. You might be a foreigner, but can affect the future of Forest's Edge from the inside. Compared to Rock City's Kamyua Yost, I think you are the most dangerous person.」

「You only feel this way because you still don't see me as a denizen of Forest's Edge, correct?」

I replied. I wasn't afraid, but an uncomfortable and suffocating feeling assaulted me.

「I sincerely wish to be a denizen of Forest's Edge. But my time in Forest's Edge is still short, so I feel uneasy about the drastic changes in Forest's Edge brought by decisions I had made. I decided that this is the best path only after consulting with Ai Fa, Kaslan Lutim, and Donda Wu... Jiza Wu, you don't want the Wu clan to interact with the Post Station Town and Tsun clan in such a way, do you?」

「If you are asking my opinion— of course, I don't want that. I think the future of Forest's Edge should be decided by the denizens of Forest's Edge.」

「Hmm... in that case, you can think of this as Donda Wu and Kaslan Lutim using me like a tool to forge open a path for the future of Forest's Edge. That's how I feel anyway...」

「Even if you are just a tool, the one controlling you is neither the Wu clan nor Lutim house.」

Jiza Wu's eyes were still narrowed into a slit and shone with a dark light.

The light was sharp, like a black blade.

「The one manipulating you is the head of the Fa house. Speaking of which, the head of the Fa house who doesn't have any kin has the future of Forest's Edge in her hands.」

「You're mistaken. Ai Fa isn't the only one I hold dear to me. Besides, Ai Fa is acting in the best interest of Forest's Edge, not for personal gain.」

And that was why Ai Fa changed her mindset and decided to rely on the Wu clan and Lutim house.

The day after, Ai Fa even caught a fever from worrying too much — and even so, she still believes that Kaslan Lutim's judgment was correct, and chose to accept his opinion.

To me, that was the Wu clan, Lutim house and Fa house working together to pave the future of Forest's Edge— but Jiza Wu didn't think so.

「... This wouldn't have happened if Ai Fa married Darum two years ago.」

Jiza Wu said in a calm tone.

「If Jiba and Rimee didn't forge a bond with Ai Fa... If Ai Fa didn't meet you in the forest...」

「I think these were happy scenes but are they an unfortunate occurrence to you?」

I tried to endure the formless pressure and mustered the strength in my joints.

「If that is true, it's too sad.」

A stinging current seemed to be flowing in the air.

My knees felt like they would turn to jelly if I relaxed for a moment.

The pressure he was giving out was a match for Donda Wu when he gets mad.

The pressure Donda Wu exerted was the venting of his emotions. But I couldn't feel any emotions in the pressure that was coming from Jiza Wu.

The core of this pressure didn't stem from emotions like rage or hatred, but something that was the furthest from me— a sense of duty, a sense of belonging to the tribe, the pride of a hunter, etc.

Anyway, the pressure he was giving out was really scary.

I could only grit my teeth and endure, and not yield to this pressure.

I didn't know how much time had passed—

Ai Fa's voice came from behind Jiza Wu, disrupting our standoff.

「Asuta, what are you doing there?」

The pressure from Jiza Wu disappeared without a trace.

When he turned his body slightly to the side, I could see Ai Fa carrying a faggot³ of firewood tied up with ropes on her back.

「If you are free now, come help me. You will need more firewood tomorrow compared to yesterday, right?」

「Ah, yes, right... I understand, I'm coming.」

Ai Fa walked slowly to me.

Jiza Wu bowed at her, then shifted his gaze to me.

「I should get going too. It's great that we finally got to talk after such a long time.」

I nodded slightly and couldn't find the right words to say.

After Jiza Wu left, Ai Fa came over.

「Asuta, what were you doing?」

She had a scary expression when she was close.

「That was the first time I saw that eldest son emit such an intense killing intent. When I'm not around, don't go near that man alone.」

「B-But he wanted to talk, and I couldn't turn him down.」

「You have to reject him no matter what... I can't tell what the eldest son is thinking, or how to be on guard against him.」

3 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faggot_\(unit\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faggot_(unit))

Ai Fa leaned in closer and looked into my eyes. Our noses were almost touching.

「Hmmp... I could never imagine how fearless you are when shrouded in such terrifying bloodlust. Your strength might still be lacking, but your courage has grown.」

「Hey, are you praising me or making a dig at me? Can you choose just one?」

「In that case, I will praise you.」

Ai Fa pressed her forehead against mine.

「Asuta, even a man from Forest's Edge would find it hard to stay calm under the incredible pressure emitted by that eldest son. For a weak hearth caretaker, you sure are cocky.」

「Hey—」

「I complimented you, so you can be proud of yourself.」

Ai Fa showed a fearless smile.

「Since you are so brave, then the men from the Tsun clan would be nothing to be afraid of. I can relax a bit more before the house head conference... Asuta, let's gather more firewood. I need to let my dull body get back to its original condition.」

Chapter 1 - The Depraved Clan

Part 1

To say that nothing of note happened between the seminar and the house head conference wasn't really truthful.

We opened the stall in the Post Station Town one day after the seminar and sold two hundred meals.

Sales dropped on the very next day— because we only prepared 170 portions, which were sold out too.

After one day of rest, we opened for two days and closed for two more days. The irregular operating hours stimulated the demand for our merchandise. Before this, I couldn't sell 150 meals even if I did prepare them.

Our customers were still mostly southerners and easterners, but kiba food was steadily becoming the talk of the Post Station Town. When we start selling food at the inn, the fame of kiba food would spread even further.

No matter what the schemes the Tsun clan had, we must make this business succeed.

As I worked hard with these feelings in mind, the 8th and 9th day of the Blue Month flashed by—and it was now the day of the house head conference.

「... The Tsun clan village sure is far.」

As I walked on the solid dirt path inside Forest's Edge, I whispered to Ai Fa.

Ai Fa walked with smooth strides like a leopard and answered quietly:

「The Tsun clan village is located at the end of the northern side, while the Wu clan village is situated in the middle of the southern side, so of course it's far.」

The Forest's Edge settlement was a long piece of land that stretched from the south to the north.

A vast forest was between the Morga Mountain to the east and the wide territory of Genos to the west, resulting in such a shape.

Tsun clan village was at the extreme north end, while the Wu clan and Lutim house villages were to the south, with the smaller houses like the Fa house between them. From the bearings of the sun, I realized we had walked for two hours, but the scenery remained the same.

「Hmm... This means that the Tsun clan people actually walked so far on the night of the Lutim house wedding to pick a fight with us.」

After whispering to Ai Fa again, she nodded and leaned her face towards me.

「Yes, because they don't perform their duties as hunters properly, they have that much free time. How infuriating.」

「That's right. If they have the time to walk so far, they might as well go hunt kiba.」

「... By the way, Asuta.」

「Hmm? What's the matter, Ai Fa?」

「Why are you whispering?」

Ai Fa didn't know my intention but had been whispering to me all this while.

「It's nothing serious. I simply think the atmosphere right now doesn't feel good for an idle chat.」

We weren't the only ones heading to the Tsun clan. We had set off together with the Wu clan and their kins.

The Wu clan had six kin houses related to them by blood. They were Lutim, Lei, Min, Mamu, Lilim, and Mufa. Each house head brought along a male follower to attend the house head conference. Together with the women helping with the hearth, we had a large group of 24 people.

The male attendees were strong elites too, so the term 「intimidating」 was very fitting. Everyone present had attended the banquet at the Lutim house, but I only knew three people, namely Donda Wu, Darum Wu, and Dan Lutim.

They were helping to carry the ingredients needed for the banquet tonight. No one had any complaints, but I still felt bad about this.

「... Sigh, I'm getting sleepy.」

Someone suddenly spoke loudly beside me.

I turned and saw the youngest man in the group yawning.

「I have not gotten up so early in a long time. Donda Wu, can I sleep for a while when we reach the Tsun clan village?」

「Whatever.」

Donda Wu replied coldly.

「Great. I will get up right away if anything happens, so give me a break... Hmm? What are you looking at, hearth caretaker of the Fa house? 」

「Ah, it's nothing, pardon me. 」

「There's nothing to pardon though, I just want to know what are you looking at. 」

The youth didn't look unhappy, but he didn't seem to be the calm type either.

As I was wondering how to answer, the youth sped up and started to walk beside me.

「Speaking of which, I still don't know your name. I'm Rau Lei. Hearth caretaker of the Fa house, what's your name? 」

「Nice to meet you, I'm Asuta. 」

He might be younger than me, but I still decided to answer him with a humble attitude.

At this moment, the youth showed an unhappy face.

「Asuta, I'm seventeen. How old are you? 」

「Ah, I'm seventeen too. 」

「In that case, you don't need to be so reserved, you can just speak to me normally. 」

The youth said the same thing that Yumi did, but he had a dignified air about him.

His light-colored hair that looked almost blonde were tied behind him, the corners of his eyes were high and their pupils were light purple. With his high nose bridge and thin lips, he looked like a matured version of Ludo Wu. He looked androgynous and had a prideful expression.

He was a little taller than me and could be considered skinny compared to the other men from Forest's Edge. He looked young and wasn't buffed, but the aura around him could rival that of the other men.

「Never mind, Kaslan Lutim mentioned to me that you are running a business in the Post Station Town, I'm not sure about the details though. But if the Tsun clan tries to pick trouble with you, I will do everything I can to help. 」

「Yes, thank you very much. 」



「... Didn't I tell you not to be so reserved?」

「I didn't mean to, it's probably because of my business in the Post Station Town, so it's more relaxing for me to speak this way.」

「I see. If you talk to me in such a formal tone again, I will punch you.」

「.....」

「Are you really the hearth caretaker of the Fa house?」

The youth named Rau Lei leaned in close suddenly.

「When the Tsun clan barged into the banquet, didn't you tell them off loudly? You are acting like a completely different person now.」

「No, I was just acting on impulse back then.」

「In that case, you should act on impulse today too. If the Tsun clan sees how meek you are, they will exploit you all they could.」

It seemed that this youth's concept on how to deal with aggression was completely different from mine.

I thought the first thing that needs to be done during a dangerous situation was to calm down.

「Asuta, Kaslan Lutim taught the Lei house the techniques how to bloodlet and butcher the kiba. The kiba meat did become delicious, but it still couldn't match the dishes you served at the banquet. What do we need to do to turn the meat into that soft and gooey form?」

「Ah, you mean hamburg steak? It needs mincing and molding the meat into a circular shape... That dish is hard to explain with words. The women from the Wu clan and Lutim house have learned the cooking method, you just need to learn from them.」

To avoid being punched, I answered in a normal tone, and Rau Lei turned to look diagonally back.

「Ema Min Lutim, teach the method to the women of the Lei house. I want to eat that dish at home too.」

Like everyone else, Ema Min Lutim was carrying a large bag of vegetables on her back. She bowed politely at Rau Lei.

「I understand. My skill is still lacking, but I hope the women of the Lei house and I will improve our skills together.」

「... Ema Min Lutim, how old are you?」

「Rau Lei, I'm 17.」

「In that case, your tone doesn't need to be so formal, just speak casually like Asuta.」

「As a kin of the Wu clan, I can't speak to the head of the Lei house in such a rude manner.」

This youth— was he the head of the Lei house?

「After becoming the house head, the attitude of the all women became like this... Asuta, you might be a hearth caretaker, but you are still a man, so talk to me normally.」

Looks like I got acquainted with a youth I wasn't sure how to get along with.

I looked Ai Fa's way quietly, but my house head averted her face nonchalantly.

「What's the matter? Does the head of the Lei house like hamburg steak? I don't think hamburg steak tastes bad, but spare ribs are the best, right?」

The head of the Lutim house interjected.

He walked towards us as he swayed his large tummy. Was he going to get me out of this mess? Probably not.

「Spare ribs, huh. They're delicious— but isn't it a pain to eat them together with the bone?」

「What nonsense! It's delicious because we are eating it off the bone! If possible, I want to eat the kiba thigh with its bones too!」

Cooking the meat thoroughly seemed hard.

However, if I researched steam grill techniques, it might be possible to realize his dream.

「Those who like hamburg steak are mostly women and children. It's admirable of you to become the house head at such a young age, but you still have a childish side, huh.」

Dan Lutim laughed out loud. Rau Lei immediately showed a sour face.

「Is the Lutim house trying to provoke the Lei house? Aren't you going too far to treat a grown-up hunter as a child?」

「If you don't want others to think of you as a child, then don't complain and eat the spare ribs. That delicacy suits hunters the best!」

Dan Lutim didn't care about the raging Rau Lei, and turned his large round eyes my way.

「Asuta! Did you prepare any spare ribs for us tonight? That myam and thin slices of meat might be savory, but they can't compare to the tastiness of spare ribs!」

I see. Ema Min Lutim and Molun Lutim learned how to cook 『Myam-roasted meat』 during the seminar three days ago and used their culinary skills to prepare dinner immediately.

That was a wonderful thing, but I couldn't help tilting my head puzzledly when hearing that.

「Some of the meat here is from the Lutim house, right? Are there any spare ribs? 」

「I don't know. Kaslan did tell me something, but I was too sleepy and didn't hear anything. 」

「... I see. 」

「Just the thought of the Tsun clan tasting this delicious meat fills me with rage. But if that bunch will change their ways, I will let them off! If they want to eat delicious meat, they need to hunt down kiba seriously! I'm going to kick them in the butt! 」

「No, erm, can you try to calm down...? 」

「 Hmm? Why do you look so worried? I don't mean it literally, there's no way I will act so recklessly! 」

Was that true? Allow me to sigh quietly.

I couldn't relax at all since I had seen him raging at the Tsun clan during that wedding banquet.

「... But if they lost their reason and tried to do anything to you, there's no telling what I might do. 」

Dan Lutim laughed heartily, and the face of a hunter flashed momentarily across his cheerful face.

「I have no qualms about going to war with the Tsun clan, but it would be pointless if you died. The most important thing is that you must live. Do you get that, Asuta? 」

Dan Lutim seemed uninterested in my business in the Post Station Town.

He didn't understand Ai Fa's, Kaslan Lutim's, and my goal of 「Letting the denizens of Forest's Edge live a more prosperous life」 .

However, when Kaslan Lutim told him that 「the Tsun clan seemed to be targeting Asuta」 , he was so enraged that he wanted to go to the Tsun clan village and tell them off. That's what Kaslan Lutim told me.

I thought he was only infatuated with the taste of spare ribs and didn't care about me at all. I felt ashamed for harboring such thoughts.

「Yes, thank you. 」

In return to my embarrassed gratitude, Dan Lutim laughed loudly again and slapped my back hard.

「Don't worry, the women will protect you in the stove room, leave the other places to us! Asuta, you just need to relax and prepare a delicious meal! 」

His words were filled with strength, and so were his physical actions.

I thought I heard my ribs creaking, but fortunately, they didn't fracture.

「Hmmp, there is no need to fear the Tsun clan, the ones we need to be wary about are their retarded kins. A scrawny man like you is no match for them, so don't ever agitate those people.」

Even though Rau Lei didn't mince his words, he still said that out of concern.

I never thought the kins of the Wu clan would be so friendly to Ai Fa and me.

Aside from Rau Lei, I had yet to speak with the others. Everyone else had a serious face, and despite the additional work I had imposed on them, no one had any complaints.

They had such an attitude because they didn't want to let the Tsun clan act with impunity. Even though Ai Fa and I weren't the kins of the Wu clan, but, judging from the atmosphere right now, everyone seemed to accept us readily.

Maybe the reason was the Lutim house wedding banquet Rau Lei mentioned just now.

When the three stooges from the Tsun clan gate tried to crash the Lutim house banquet, all the men were fuming with anger. And some of those men traveling with us now.

In order to defeat a common enemy, people will become united. This trope also applied to Ai Fa and me.

If that is the case, it will be even better.

There weren't any misunderstandings between both parties.

I might not be a kin of these men, but our detest for the Tsun clan made us the same.

As I thought about these matters, Donda Wu who was walking at the head of the group muttered:

「The village is in sight...」

I cast my gaze to the front in a hurry and held my breath a little. I could see a vague image of an incredible structure on the other side of the trees.

No, that house wasn't big enough for the term 「structure」. It looked like a huge pile of straws in the middle of an empty space. The appearance was similar to a half-cave building from the stone age.

But the scale of the house was exceptional. It had a dome shaped like an inverted bowl, with a diameter of over 20 m. It might look flat from outside, but the peak of the bowl was about two stories high.

The entrance was a rectangular hole in black color. The roof on top of the bowl was like a triangular hat, with a square hole right on top for ventilation.

The workmanship was crude, but considering the impoverished state of the Forest's Edge, erecting such a large building was a testament to the Tsun clan's power and influence.

「That's the Tsun clan's Ceremonial Hall.」

Ai Fa explained.

The house head conference would be conducted in this hall.

With the Ceremonial Hall as center, more than 10 familiar wooden houses were scattered around the vicinity.

「... Welcome to the Tsun clan village.」

A man appeared before us nimbly.

This middle-aged man had his grey hair combed behind him and wore a grey beard. He had a buffed body but had a lifeless and quiet air about him. He was Tay Tsun.

「You are very early. I thought only the hearth caretaker would be here at noon.」

「Hmmp, how can the women carry so much baggage by themselves?」

Donda Wu answered Tay Tsun with a deep voice akin to a tremor.

「Take us to the stove room of the main house. We will greet the tribe chief after that.」

「Yes... Before that, can we collect the tusks and horns from everyone?」

When Yamiel Tsun and I reached an agreement, all the houses were notified to pay a tribute of one kiba's worth of tusks and horns when they attend the house head conference.

In the Post Station Town, two large tusks and horns could bring in twelve copper plates. This wasn't much for the Fa house, the Wu clan, and their kins, but for the smaller houses that could miss meals every so often, this was a matter of life and death.

Even though the forest had plentiful resources, the landlord of Genos forbade the denizens of Forest's Edge from foraging fruits in the forest or cultivating the land. They could only exchange the tusks, horns, and hides of kiba for copper plates.

After all the houses submitted the tusks and horns to the Tsun clan, the Tsun clan then passed this money to us, the hearth caretakers, as payment. I thought that by asking a fee we only increased the burden on the smaller houses.

In order to correct the Tsun clan's twisted ways, we could only go along with their plan.

In that case, I had to do everything I could to bring them hope that could make up for their losses.

「This way, please...」

Tay Tsun accepted 8 sets of kiba tusks and horns, strung them all up, and walked to the village.

He was as lifeless and meek as usual.

By the way, I don't think a hunter should be an usher, so why was this man always taking care of such trivial matters?

... Hmm? We don't need to hand over our blades?

According to the rules in the Wu clan village, I had to hand over my kitchen knife before heading into the stove room. But the Tsun clan didn't make such a request.

Never mind, that's one less hassle to worry about, but it also made me realize that the discipline in the Tsun clan was very lax.

「... Still as creepy as usual.」

Rau Lei muttered when he walked by me.

Was he complaining about Tay Tsun or this village— maybe both? It was almost noon, but I didn't see a single soul.

I heard no sound of wood being chopped.

Nor I saw anyone drying pico leaves.

There weren't any women chatting idly or children running around happily.

It was like a deserted village.

As I looked closely along the way, I found the large Ceremonial Hall to be in terrible shape. The structure had been reinforced, but the walls covered in straws were rotting away. There was plenty of rain in Forest's Edge, so the design of this building wasn't ideal. My guess is that the denizens of Forest's Edge used to live in houses like this in olden times when they were still staying in the southern jungle.

When this building was erected, the Tsun clan was still a tribal chief clan capable of leading their people down the right path.

That was my personal opinion. Only the people from Grandma Jiba's generation would know if that was true.

「Over here...」

Hidden behind the Ceremonial Hall that was like the corpse of a dinosaur, we could see a grand building on par with the Wu clan main house.

This had to be the Tsun clan main house. I started turning tense.

This was the home base of the enemy— the base of the nefarious Diga Tsun with whom we experienced numerous bad run-ins.

Tay Tsun walked in perfect strides like a robot and went to the back of the building.

「... This is the stove room.」

The stove room of the Tsun clan was just like the Wu clan, a small building situated behind the main house.

The scale matched that of the Wu clan too, they also had two outdoor stoves.

「Where are the Tsun clan's women?」

Mama Mia Lei asked, and Tay Tsun bowed towards us with his usual hollow eyes.

「Please wait a moment, I will call them over.」

After Tay Tsun disappeared, everyone piled the ingredients at the entrance.

Over 90 kg of kiba meat.

More than 400 aria and almost 300 poitan.

Fruit wine and seasonings such as rock salt and myam.

Kitchen cutleries and fake rubber leaves to serve food.

When all the ingredients were piled at the same spot, the amount looked staggering.

There would be 79 people attending the house head conference, 41 people from the Tsun clan village and 9 hearth caretakers— adding ten additional portions for Mida Tsun, there was enough food for 139 pax.

On the surface, the men's work had concluded. There was still two to three hours of free time before the house head conference began. They planned to stand by around the stove room for now.

「... Even after the house head conference begins, the Tsun clan branch house members can still move around freely. Asuta, don't get careless now, alright?」

Ai Fa instructed me quietly. She had reminded me of this several times already.

「I understand. No matter what, I won't act alone... Ai Fa, you be careful too.」

「Hmmp, I won't be in any danger. But I think it's a pity that Kaslan Lutim won't be attending.」

That's right, Ai Fa had to explain what led her to make the decision of having the Fa house open a business in the Post Station Town. According to the customs of Forest's Edge, the eldest son who

was the heir had to protect the house when the house head conference was in session, so Kaslan Lutim was absent today.

Donda Wu and Dan Lutim wouldn't be much help, and the second son of Lutim house wasn't as well-spoken as Kaslan Lutim.

Speaking of which, Kaslan Lutim was the one who was too special. I had never met anyone in Forest's Edge who spoke as rationally as he did.

This was the nature of the denizens of Forest's Edge. They had strong feelings towards their kin and tribe, so I had never met anyone with a more realist trend in their thinking. Among my small circle of friends, only Kaslan Lutim and Grandma Jiba was the realist type— Jiza Wu's, Sati Lei Wu's, and Ema Min Lutim's personalities also leaned towards being realists.

「... It will be fine. The important thing is to convey your feelings to everyone.」

I whispered to Ai Fa.

「No matter how well-spoken people like Kamyua Yost and I might be, I won't be able to convey my feelings to the denizens of Forest's Edge. You are a member of Forest's Edge, so you will definitely do better than us.」

「... How can you say that after spending so much time with me? I don't understand. Never mind, at least you aren't refuting my abilities.」

Ai Fa said brusquely, then rubbed her nose.

「I will do my best in my task... Asuta, it's time for you to work.」

I followed Ai Fa's gaze and saw Tay Tsun coming from the back of the house again.

Ten women followed him. One of them hastened her pace, passed Tay Tsun and appeared before Ai Fa and me.

「Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa house, we have been awaiting your visit. The clan head Zuro and my brother Mida had been looking forward to your arrival.」

The eldest daughter of the Tsun clan welcomed us with these words.

This was the first time we met her inside Forest's Edge.

When Yamiel Tsun went to the Post Station Town, she covered her body with veils and shawls. And right now, she was dressed lightly before us, with just a tube top, cloth around her waist and metallic accessories on her wrists. Compared to meeting her in town, she looked more beautiful — and even more creepy.

Her brown hair was braided into dreads.

The corners of her eyes were high and her pupils were black.

Her body shape and limbs were long and slender, and her body figure was on par with Vena Wu. However, there was a strong rotting odor on her body.

Ai Fa and Vena Wu didn't have such a scent.

The only thing I was better at than the denizens of Forest's Edge was my keen sense of smell. The denizens of Forest's Edge not only had outstanding physical abilities, their eyes and ears were exceptionally honed too. However, my sense of smell was still a little better than theirs.

That was why Yamiel Tsun put me on edge the most. That might not be human blood, but the blood stench from her did obviously make me uncomfortable.

「... By the way, I need to inform you something.」

Yamiel Tsun said with a cold smile:

「The payment to the Fa house will be 36 kiba worth of tusks and horns instead of 40. Can I seek your kind understanding about that?」

「What...? We can only decide after listening to the reason.」

「It's very simple. During this past year, the number of houses had decreased from 40 to 36. Four houses had died out, or joined other houses before dying out... Thus, you may decrease the number of portions to prepare by 8, and we hope to amend the remuneration to 36 kiba worth of tusks and horns.」

「... Compared to an increase, it is definitely easier to handle a decrease in numbers. But an agreement between denizens of Forest's Edge can't be amended so easily, right?」

「Indeed, that's why we are sincerely asking for your understanding.」

What sincerity? Don't make me laugh. I shrugged. They definitely had a way of informing us once they knew the number of houses had decreased. Her words reeked of so much hypocrisy that I felt retarded for treating her seriously.

However, I could only fight within my own realm.

「We have no intentions of carrying this huge amount of luggage back either. However, we will need the Wu clan and Lutim house to agree to this, since we will be splitting the remuneration equally.」

「The money isn't important. Let's get right to work.」

Mama Mia Lei wasn't fazed at all and walked in front of Yamiel Tsun.

Yamiel Tsun glanced at her coldly and seemed disinterested.

「Asuta of the Fa house, I will leave the rest to you. You can order these 15 women around as you wish.」

Fifteen, that was quite a big number.

I heard the Tsun clan village had 41 people, and they seemed to have gathered all the women. After looking at them...

I was dumbstruck.

... What's going on?

It was a group of Forest's Edge women of various ages.

The eldest was around 50, while the youngest was ten. There was a mixture of wed and unwed women. There was nothing strange with their appearance.

However, all their eyes looked blank and hollow.

Be it middle-aged housewives or young children, their eyes were all murky just like Diga Tsun's.

The women's brown faces didn't have any expression. I couldn't feel the unique energy and life force of the Forest's Edge denizens from them. They didn't seem to have any problems with their health and body. They didn't look skinny or sickly. Instead, the women were lackluster and lifeless.

Be it the Post Station Town, or the world I was from—I had never met anyone as lifeless as them who resembled flawed mud dolls, standing blankly in place.

「I have other works to attend to, so I will take my leave now... Ah, the clan head is still resting, would the men please visit him later?」

Yamiel Tsun turned and left after showing a venomous snake-like smile.

As if it was expected, Tay Tsun followed her.

After seeing them off, Mama Mia Lei clapped loudly.

「Alright, everyone, go bring in the ingredients. Please start with the poitan!」

Tsun clan didn't answer and walked slowly towards us.

They weren't particularly slow, but the entire group looked like walking corpse.

「... Who was that disgusting woman?」

Dan Lutim muttered unhappily as he stood behind us.

Even though he seemed to be saying to himself, I still answered:

「She is the eldest daughter of the main house, Yamiel Tsun.」

「A woman from the main house, huh. She seemed more competent than the three stooges, but I don't want to eat dinner with anyone who has such an awful stench.」

「Ehh?」

I looked up at Dan Lutim's huge body in surprise, and he kept twitching his round nose.

「Why was the smell of rotting blood on that woman? She looked so scrawny and didn't seem to be doing any skinning work.」

「... Dan Lutim, your nose is really sharp.」

「Hmm? When I enter the woods, I can determine where the kiba is with my nose. In the Lutim house, only me and my father Raa can do that.」

He shook his tummy proudly and rubbed his round nose.

「Anyway, I don't like her. I despise everyone from the Tsun clan, but I find her exceptionally detestable. Asuta, you must never trust that woman.」

「Yes, I agree with you completely.」

I nodded and grabbed a sack of poitan.

I then turned towards Ai Fa.

「Alright then, I'm off to work... Let's both work hard.」

Ai Fa nodded silently with a serious face.

The curtains to our battle at the Tsun clan were drawn quietly.

Part 2

There were eight women from the Wu clan and Lutim house who came with me to the Tsun clan to help.

The Tsun clan dispatched 15 women to assist.

We had to prepare 130 portions of meal, so the numbers were adequate. The question was the quality of the helpers.

「Erm, who here is from the Tsun clan?」

I asked after carrying all the poitan and cooking wares into the stove room.

As the stove room was too cramped for 24 people, I shifted my base to the entrance of the stove room.

Ai Fa, Donda Wu, and the others sat on the ground some distance away, keeping a close eye on the stove room as they chewed on jerky.

「... No one from the main house is here.」

One of the older women answered in a monotone voice.

「Is that so? That is troubling. For the sake of Mida Tsun, I wanted the women from the main house to learn how to cook these dishes.」

「.....」

「What's the matter?」

「... The women from the main house don't need to tend to the hearth.」

「Ehh? Then who tends to their hearth?」

「... We tend to the hearth in their stead.」

「I see... But there are three women in the main house, right?」

Kaslan Lutim once told me that aside from the eldest daughter Yamiel Tsun, the Tsun clan main house had one more daughter. The third female was the spouse of the clan head.

That woman only repeated: 「... We tend to the hearth in their stead.」

「Alright, I understand. Well then, let's get started... First, start the fire in all the stoves. I only see four pots, can you get three more from the branch houses?」

The women from the Tsun clan didn't answer and started moving slowly.

Vena Wu whispered to me as she looked at their lifeless figures:

「This is really unsettling... Maybe it will be more efficient if we just tend to the hearth without them.」

「Yes. But we can't do that, which is a problem.」

There were many factors which made us decide to let the Tsun clan women learn my cooking techniques.

First, since Mida Tsun had no immunity towards delicious food, they would need to satiate his appetite.

Next, even though Asuta from the Fa house was capable of cooking delicious meals, it shouldn't mean that I was a unique existence. We had to let the head of the Tsun clan Zuro Tsun understand this.

Finally, delicious food could bring more strength to the denizens of Forest's Edge and lead to a more prosperous life. We had to let all the house heads know this.

However, given how lifeless these women were, could I teach them how to cook?

Compared to the wedding banquet for the Lutim house, tending the Tsun clan's hearth was an extremely arduous task.

「Please pour in water until the pots are six tenths full. Make the fire bigger... When the water boils, put in 40 poitan into each pot.」

There were five stoves in the room, and I assigned ten Tsun clan women, the three Wu clan sisters, and Tali Wu there.

I let the five Tsun clan women and the Lutim house ladies handle the two stoves outside.

This wasn't just to instruct the Tsun clan women, but also for the Wu clan to watch their every move. We had to make sure they didn't sabotage the food. As the Tsun clan would be eating them, so it was unlikely for them to poison the food. Yet, we had to be extra careful when dealing with the Tsun clan.

「When the poitan starts drying, please stir it, keeping in mind not to burn it... Alright then, let's check the next steps.」

I asked Mama Mia Lei and Shela Wu to come to the stove room entrance.

「According to the plan, we should be using the branch house's stove to make meat soup after the poitan is done. Vena Wu and Lala Wu will team up with me. Mia Lei Wu, Ema Min Lutim, and Molun Lutim will be in another team. Shela Wu, Leina Wu, and Tali Wu will be the third team, is that fine?」

「That's fine. But you want to leave the dried poitan here while we are cooking soup, right? That worries me the most.」

「I feel uneasy too, but we can't prepare such a large amount of food in one place. We can only check the taste of the dishes frequently to make sure they are not pulling any pranks.」

「That's true... but why are all the women from the Tsun clan like this...」

Before Mama Mia Lei finished, the yell of men came from outside.

I followed the origin of the sound and found several unfamiliar men beside Donda Wu and the others.

「Uwah... what is that?」

Even from this distance, I could clearly see the weird outfit of that group.

Six men were yelling at Donda Wu's entourage.

Four of them wore kiba hides over their heads, while the other two were actually wearing kiba skulls.

「They are from the northern side of Forest's Edge. The ones with hides are from the Zaza and Jean houses. The ones wearing skulls are from the Dom house... They all are the Tsun clan's kins.」

「So they are the Tsun clan's kins...」

「That's right, in a sense, they are more troublesome than the Tsun clan. They are even more short-tempered than our clan head.」

「Ehh? They are more stubborn than Donda Wu!?」

After saying that, I thought to myself 「This is the end」.

The wife of the stubborn clan head laughed cheerfully.

「Their heads are as hard as rocks, and still swear their allegiance to the chief clan. The Dom and Zaza villages are at the northernmost end and some distance away from the Tsun clan, so they don't realize how depraved the chief clan has become.」

「I see... That's really tricky.」

「That's right, what a pain. They might even think the Wu clan and Fa house are disrupting the peace in Forest's Edge by going against the chief clan.」

That would be really, really problematic.

I had gotten cocky since the men from the Tsun clan main house were all mob characters. I even thought that Donda Wu and Dan Lutim won't ever lose to them even if the Tsun clan acted with impunity.

The fierce and intimidating Tsun kins got right in the faces of the Wu clan's men.

The men wearing hides and skulls were as buffed as Donda Wu and Dan Lutim. They looked like giant kiba standing on their hind legs because of the outrageous get-up they were in.

They showed no fear even though the six of them were going up against Donda Wu's entourage of 15. I didn't know why they were so agitated, but the atmosphere was really tense.

「Uwah, I already told you to be careful not to burn them!」

At this moment, Lala Wu's panicking voice could be heard.

「You can't just stir mindlessly! Enough, move over for now!」

「...Ohh.」

The other party responded lacklusterly.

I stole a glance at the stove room and saw Lala Wu snatching the spatula from a young Tsun clan girl and starting to struggle with the poitan in the pot.

「Sorry, Asuta! The poitan is badly burned! Should we move the pot away for now?」

「Yes, otherwise the charred part would be mixed with the parts that are still fine. Shift it down even if it's not all done—」

「Uwah!」

At this moment, there was a sudden scream.

Followed by the sound of something heavy falling onto the ground.

It came from outside.

Mama Mia Lei and I rushed out and saw Molun Lutim sitting on the ground and Ema Min Lutim standing beside them with a troubled look. Most of the poitan in the pot had been spilled. Two Tsun clan women were standing blankly with a krilee stick used for carrying heavy items at the side.

「Ema Min Lutim, what happened?」

「Ah, Asuta, sorry. Our poitan have dried, so I asked them to bring the pot down, and this happened.」

While Ema Min Lutim was nursing her temple as if she had a headache, Molun Lutim who was sitting beside a middle-aged lady roared: 「I was almost scalded!」. Her usually amiable face was now red with anger.

「Why is your posture so unsteady? How can you tend to the hearth if you can't even move a pot!?!」

She resembled her father when she was raging.

「Ohh.」

The Tsun clan women nodded with their usual lifeless expression.

「... This will be a long day.」

Mama Mia Lei sighed deeply beside me.

「The house heads are having a hard time, but we can't spare the effort to worry about them. The Tsun clan women can't even handle the simplest poitan, can we really ask them to prepare the meat soup and steaks?」

「That's right. I need to rethink this.」

I wanted to see how capable the Tsun clan women were with this dish, but it seems that I couldn't afford to take things so easily.

After stealing a last glance at Ai Fa's group who were facing off against the Tsun clan's kins, I returned to the stove room.

「Lala Wu! Bring the pot with the burned poitan here! And the ladle from the water flask too... Shela Wu, take over Lala Wu's role and assist Leina Wu.」

「Alright.」

I placed the pot brought by Lala Wu and a Tsun clan woman together with the pot from team Lutim.

「Use the ladle to move the poitan that isn't burned into this pot. Then bring another new pot, no, two new pots over. We will use one of those pots to replace the spilled and charred poitan.」

From the looks of things, It might be lucky that the Tsun clan canceled 8 orders of food.

We did bring extra ingredients in case any mistakes were made, but I didn't expect such a huge mishap.

Are they doing this intentionally to hold us back? — Probably not.

It would make sense if they could shift some blame to us for the mistakes, but all they were doing was wasting food and getting all the blame.

I thought they were just hopelessly lacking in motivation.



「Alright, let's use all the poitan we brought today. Lala Wu, please demonstrate and handle everything.」

「Yes, I don't want to waste more poitan... Why are all of you looking so listless, just what do you think these important ingredients are? These are poitan bought with kiba tusks and horns, which the men risked their lives to obtain.」

「Sorry」

After Lala Wu lectured them angrily, the Tsun clan women apologized emotionlessly.

I walked back to the stove room with those not involved here. Aside from the pot Lala Wu was in charge of, everyone else had finished their tasks.

But Vena Wu and Leina Wu looked a little dejected.

「These poitan have dried up, right? Then please shift the pot outside to a sunny spot! Be careful and don't spill it!」

A few seconds later, the Tsun clan women grabbed the krilee sticks.

When everyone brought the pots outside and Lala Wu finished the additional portions, I gathered everyone to the stove room entrance again.

「Poitan that had been dried needs to be sunned until all the moisture is gone. Meanwhile, we will prepare the kiba and aria soup. Before we work on the soup, I want to confirm the work we need to do... Would the ladies from the Tsun clan please come into the stove room.」

I glanced at the women moving silently, then grabbed a sack of kiba meat piled beside the door.

「Vena Wu, can you come with me? Everyone else, please watch by the door.」

Even though the Tsun clan's stove room could rival that of the Wu clan, it was crowded with Vena Wu, 15 Tsun clan women, and me inside.

The other members who couldn't squeeze into the stove room made faces that seemed to say 「What are you trying to do?」

I placed the sack on the working platform near the stove and surveyed the women who were lined up.

「This is the kiba meat we brought from the Wu clan and Lutim house. We will be cooking dinner with it.」

The Tsun clan women looked at me absentmindedly, their eyes were like dead fish.

「This meat had been specially processed to remove its stench. I am selling food made from this meat in a stall in the Post Station Town, have you heard about that?」

「... No.」

I asked a woman standing near me, and she answered.

「I see. Then do you know the background on why I who has no relations with the Tsun clan was asked to tend to the hearth here? 」

「... I don't know.」

「Okay. Ten days ago, the youngest son of the Tsun clan visited my stall and bought my food. He rather liked my cooking. And so, the head of the Tsun clan Zuro Tsun asked me to tend to the hearth, even if it was just for one night.」

The women didn't have any reactions.

They didn't seem to be very afraid of the members from the Tsun clan main house.

「I have to prepare food that will satisfy Mida Tsun. But that will be meaningless if it is only for one night, right? Since you will be tending to the Tsun clan's hearth every night, I hope you can learn to cook delicious meals... Are you willing to do so? 」

I passed the topic to another lady.

The older woman answered in an emotionless tone:

「... I have no reason to decline.」

「I see... do you want to try eating delicious food? 」

「... I don't know what that means.」

「I see, what about you? 」

I turned my attention to the young girl beside her.

「... We need to be thankful for all the food, the taste doesn't matter.」

This was the model answer in Forest's Edge.

Ai Fa, the Wu clan, and Lutim house all felt the same way in the beginning.

「You are absolutely right. But as you see, I'm from a foreign land. In my hometown, I worked as a chef. My job is to cook delicious food. As the head of the Tsun clan will be paying me, I have to finish this job no matter what.」

I looked at another woman.

「Will you help me complete this job? 」

「... We have already promised Yamiel Tsun that we will help you.」

「Thank you, everyone... But things had blown up now, so not only do I need to prepare dinner for Mida Tsun and the main house of the Tsun clan, I also need to serve the participants of the house head conference too, as well as the Tsun clan branch houses— that means you and your family.」

And finally, I took out a pack of meat from the sack.

I opened the fake rubber tree leaves and laid out the meat covered in pico leaves onto the working platform.

This was a kiba's right rear thigh meat.

「Vena Wu, can you heat the pot up with a strong fire? 」

「Yes, got it...」

While she was heating the pot, I started slicing the meat with the Santoku knife.

Even though I bought the Semu made kitchen knife, I still needed to use this Santoku knife when cutting meat.

「You might be uninterested in delicious food, but my job is to let everyone enjoy a delicious meal. It's fate that we get to work together, so I hope we can get along well.」

「... Are you angry because we burned the food and dropped the pot onto the ground? 」

The oldest woman whose hair was half white asked in a calm voice.

「If that made you unhappy, I will apologize you. We will be more careful and not repeat the mistake.」

「You don't need to apologize, I just hope everyone can work hard together.」

I observed that woman's exhausted face.

「Why do all your faces look so lifeless? Do you hate tending to the hearth? Or are you unwilling to help a foreigner like me? 」

「... No one is unhappy about this job...」

It felt like I was talking to an old dog that refused to communicate.

These women were just like Tay Tsun.

That listless and uncaring Tay Tsun who didn't show any emotions.

Speaking of which... Tay Tsun and these women are from the branch house.

From what I knew, the Tsun clan main house members didn't look so dead.

There must be a huge gulf between the main house and branch houses.

I didn't know the reason, but if this goes on, our work would end in failure.

「...Asuta, the pot is heated...」

「Thank you.」

I put down my knife.

I then held a kiba thigh meat, which was about 5 mm thick, high up before the Tsun clan women.

「I'm going to grill this meat. I only seasoned it with pico leaves. The fats on the meat are equally spread out, I will grill it right now.」

I announced as I placed the meat into the pot.

There were 15 pieces of meat.

The aroma of the meat spread in the stove room along with white smoke.

「Vena Wu, a plate and spoon, please.」

「Yes...」

The slices of meat were thin and were cooked in no time.

I moved all the meat onto the plate and offered it to the eldest woman.

「Please taste one piece of meat. This is kiba meat after bloodletting.」

The woman ate the grilled meat with the spoon.

She didn't show any emotions, but her eyebrows twitched a little.

The next woman had no reaction.

The third closed her eyes quickly.

The fourth opened her eyes slightly wider.

The fifth didn't react.

Everyone had different reactions.

The one who reacted the strongest was the youngest girl who was about ten.

She frowned uneasily and looked at her kins on both sides of her.

But no one responded to her.

「I don't know if this meat suited your taste, but you can tell it is different, right? The Wu clan and Lutim house think this meat is 『delicious』. In my time in Forest's Edge, I often heard people say that 『There is no distinction between food being tasty or not』. But I think if we are going to eat, we should try to eat delicious food.」

That was all I had to say.

They would need to experience the rest personally.

「We will be preparing more delicacies. In order to let Mida Tsun eat delectable food, I hope everyone can help... Well then, I want everyone to split into three groups to prepare the next dish.」

Part 3

When I left the stove room, the men were gone.

Where did they go? As I was pondering about that, Leina Wu came over quietly.

「The men went to the Ceremonial Hall. There is still some time before the house head conference begins, but the kins of the Tsun clan were complaining due to them loitering around the village with blades on them.」

「I see.」

I nodded.

「Asuta, what should we do next?」

「We will stick to the plan and split into three groups to prepare 『Kiba meat soup』. From then on, I hope you all can let the Tsun clan women taste-test the dishes at every critical stage of the cooking process.」

「Taste-testing?」

「Yes. And please talk to them when you are working, even idle chatter is fine. The mood is important when cooking. If they continue to cook lifelessly, the dishes will taste bland.」

「Ah... I understand that. The dish will turn delicious if the one cooking wants to make the food delicious.」

「You are absolutely right.」

I nodded firmly, and Leina smiled blissfully.

「I get it. We are too tense because they are from the Tsun clan. As fellow women of Forest's Edge, we all wish for the men to taste delicious food. I will work with them with this thought in mind.」

Leina Wu was smarter and more considerate than others.

I told the same thing to Mama Mia Lei and Shela Wu and met up with my team members.

My team consisted of Vena Wu and Lala Wu.

「Well then, would the ladies from the Tsun clan please divide into three groups. Please try to team up with your family and people you are familiar with.」

We formed groups of eight, with 5 Tsun clan women and three people from our side in each group. We brought the aria and meat we needed and headed to the stove room of the branch houses.

「Let's cut the aria. Please cut them into crescent shapes, like this.」

Every portion of 『Kiba meat soup』 required two aria and around 150 g of kiba meat.

Each group would need to prepare 44 portions of meat soup, which was 88 aria and 6.6 kg of kiba meat.

「By the way, we are preparing ten portions for Mida Tsun because he is so big. But isn't ten portions of soup a bit too much?」

I said to a woman from the Tsun clan. I was more cheerful than how I acted in the Post Station Town while operating the stall.

The woman cutting aria answered listlessly:

「Well... I don't know...」

「Never mind, it's better to have leftovers instead of having not enough. I planned to make the presentation better... Is Mida Tsun at home? Or in the woods?」

「Well... I don't know...」

「I never met the head of the Tsun clan Zuro Tsun before. He is not just the head of the Tsun clan, but also the tribal chief of Forest's Edge. What kind of person is he?」

「...Zuro Tsun is a great man...」

Was this a waste of effort?

Vena Wu and Lala Wu couldn't find anything to talk about either and turned quiet.

I decided to change my goal.

「Hey, what do you think about the meat just now?」

That girl who was about ten was in my group.

She chopped the aria mechanically and glanced at me.

「... It tastes completely different from normal kiba.」

「I know, right? We let out all the blood from a kiba before it dies, then took out its innards with proper steps. That way, we can eat the delicious torso meat on the kiba.」

「... Yes...」

「Does the Tsun clan discard the torso of the kiba into the forest too? Kiba thigh does taste nice, but there are many parts of the torso that are delicious too.」

The girl shook her head expressionlessly.

「... We don't throw away the torso.」

「Ehh?」

「We eat the head and the torso... Compared to thigh meat, these parts have a stronger stench.」

「Oh~ so that's how it is.」

I said in an amiable tone, but a sense of dissonance was growing in my heart.

So even the Tsun clan branch house eats the head and torso of kiba... Isn't that strange?

Ai Fa said the Tsun clan hogged all the prize money from Genos and didn't fulfill their duties as hunters properly. This meant that the Tsun clan used the prize money to buy aria and poitan, and when they hunted down a kiba, they ate the entire thing. Was that their diet? In that case, they could minimize their work as hunters and spend their time leisurely.

But only the Tsun clan main house would do that, right?

Were the branch house of the Tsun clan living a lazy and depraved life too?

After thinking about it, this assumption was too unrealistic.

After I started running my business in the Post Station Town, I obtained the habit of calculating the expenses.

Was the prize money from Genos so grand?

After taking on this job, I learned the number of people in the Tsun clan.

The Tsun clan main house had eight people, together with the 33 members of the branch houses, their clan consisted of 41 people.

Assuming none of them hunted any kiba.

The minimum requirement is two aria and three poitan a day. That would be 1.2 red copper plates.

For 41 people, that would be 49.2 red copper plates.

According to Kaslan Lutim, Genos gave out prize money every three months.

Three months was ninety days, and the Tsun clan would need 4428 red copper plates during this time.

In order to obtain the minimal amount of meat, they would need to hunt kiba. I included the meat into my calculation.

Assuming 500 g of kiba meat for each person, and 40 kg of meat from each kiba... They just had to hunt one kiba every two days to feed everyone.

If they sell the kiba tusks, horns, and hide, they can earn 24 red copper plates every couple of days.

That's 360 red copper plates per month.

And 1080 red copper plates in three months.

Deducting 1080 red copper plates from the 4428 red copper plates, there would be 3348 red copper plates left.

3348 red copper plates every three months meant 13,392 red copper plates a year.

If the 41 people wanted to enjoy life every day, they would need such a huge amount of red copper plates a year.

Kamyua Yost once said that the prize money was trivial.

And Ai Fa responded: 「That's why the Tsun clan hogged the prize money.」

But — could this amount be considered 「trivial」?

And this was the sum needed for the Tsun clan to survive. The Tsun clan main house members weren't living such frugal lives.

Doddo Tsun drank himself silly with fruit wine in the afternoon.

Mida Tsun had an allowance of ten red copper plates every month.

Besides, they also had to maintain their blades and buy miscellaneous items such as clothing too.

Hence, the Tsun clan wasn't just surviving on the prize money alone, and also hunted plenty of kiba— but that girl just said that they would eat the head and torso of the kiba, which contradicted that.

Looking at it another way, if the prize money was lower than my earlier estimate, that meant the Tsun clan had to hunt more than one kiba a day. Then there would definitely be excess meat.

I felt uneasy.

The entire thing felt off.

I was starting to understand why the eyes of the branch house members looked so dead. I thought they were lifeless because the Tsun clan main house kept all the prize money to themselves, and forced the branch house members to keep it a secret. Maybe that wasn't the case?

「... Asuta, the aria is done...」

Vena Wu's voice pulled me back to reality.

「Alright, we will then take care of the kiba meat. I will use the kiba thigh meat and loin meat for soup.」

I shook my head slowly and focused on the task before me.

I didn't know how much the prize money was, or how many kiba the Tsun clan actually hunted. I wouldn't get an answer no matter how hard I thought about it.

But— I still saved this doubt in a corner of my mind.

「Like the meat slices I cut earlier, please distribute the white fats when you cut the meat, it should be about this thick.」

No one answered.

I suggested that we should chat idly with the Tsun clan women, but this was the first time we met, and they had such a lifeless attitude, so what should we talk about? I decided to play dumb and ask them about the situation within the Tsun clan main house. As I was thinking about that...

「Uwah!」

Lala Wu yelled.

「T-That surprised me! Who are you and when did you come in!?」

「I was here a long while ago. You are the one who is slow for not realizing my presence.」

She spoke with a sharp voice like birds chirping.

I was shocked too. An intruder suddenly appeared in the stove room that had eight people.

That was a petite girl.

I couldn't tell her age.

She was a head shorter than Lala Wu, in other words, her height was at most 130 cm.

The limbs and body of the girl were skinny, but her head was disproportionately large. Her brown hair was tied at the top of her head, resembling an onion.

She had large eyes with small pupils that had a dangerous glint in them. Her nose and mouth were small, and her chin had a shape of a sharp triangle.

She was wearing a one-piece dress on her small body for some reason. The dress had swirly patterns, which were the type of clothing found in the city.

「... So you are the foreigner living in the Fa house?」

She stared at me with her sanpaku⁴ eyes.

「Hmmm, from your appearance, you are a citizen of the west, right? But you have the hair of an easterner, are you a mixed blood from the east and west?」

「No, I came from a nation even further away. Who are you?」

I could already guess her identity.

If the stereotype 『Tsun clan main house people are proud and arrogant』 was correct, the answer was obvious.

The girl's answer was just what I expected.

「I'm the youngest daughter of the Tsun clan Zwei Tsun... Isn't it basic courtesy to introduce yourself when you ask someone else for their names?」

「Ahh, I'm Asuta from the Fa house. Are you here to help?」

I just said that when the little girl called Zwei furrowed her brows a little and admonished me:

「Why should the main house member help in the stove room? That's the work of the branch house, right? Don't say something so ridiculous!」

「Is that so? So the Tsun clan had such a rule.」

Seeing that a member of the main house had shown up, I raised my guard to the highest level. However, the little girl was different from her siblings, and didn't leave too bad of an impression on me.

She didn't seem kind or honest, but her humorous appearance felt approachable. Just looking at her gave me a sense of déjà vu. Wasn't there a character like this in a manga or an anime?

「Hmmp! Very well, I forgive you since you're a foreigner... Hmm? Is this the magical kiba meat?」

4 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanpaku>

「No, I'm not a magician.」

「What are you saying!? Didn't you sell the kiba meat in the Post Station Town of Genos!? The people in the city absolutely detest kiba meat, so you must have cast some spell on them!」

She screamed hysterically, then narrowed her eyes and glared at me.

「Are you... really a man who earned 200 copper plates in one day? I find that hard to believe...」

「In that case, then don't believe that.」

「Enough idle talk, answer me properly! And don't lie, I will know the truth if I just check!」

She might be approachable, but she sure is noisy.

How did everyone feel when watching a scene like this? I looked around me—

Vena Wu squinted her eyes sleepily and stared at the intruder's profile.

Lala Wu frowned unhappily and glared at her too.

And— the women from the branch houses hung their head lifelessly and cut the meat quietly. They didn't react when they saw Zwei Tsun.

「Hey... How long have you run your business in the Post Station Town?」

Zwei Tsun came near to pressure me.

「Mida started crying nonstop since ten days ago. Which means you have operated for at least ten straight days, right?」

「Around there.」

I actually worked consecutively in the Post Station Town for 13 days and took one day off in between. But I had no obligation to tell her all these details.

「Ten days in a row! Assuming you earn 200 red copper plates a day, you have earned 2,000 copper plates now!」

「No, half of our revenue is used to buy ingredients, and I didn't earn 200 red copper plates right at the beginning either.」

I quickly corrected her, but she wasn't listening.

The eyes of the girl had turned into a completely different person.

What was going on? Her eyes were shining with obsession, like a famished beast.

「2,000 red copper plates... That's 200 white copper plates... And in silver plates? Two silver plates!」

「Ah, well, like I said, not all the copper plates we earned belong to me...」

「This is like a dream! With you around, the Fa house won't have to worry about copper plates for the rest of their lives...! Hmmp, so it's true...」

「Wait! Can you let me explain? What's so great about copper plates?」

「What's so great? The point of living is to earn copper plates. You are the number one hero⁵ in the Forest's Edge! You earn 200 red copper plates a day, which is more than hunting 8 kiba! I even added the money from tanning the hide in!」

This girl was good at mathematics, which was impressive.

The obsession in her eyes— was it her obsession for copper plates?

「You think people live for the sake of earning copper plates? That doesn't sound like something a denizen of Forest's Edge should say. The hunters in Forest's Edge are hunting kiba for the sake of protecting the farms in Genos, right?」

「What are you preaching? The hunters are hunting kiba for the sake of copper plates! If any hunter refutes that, then he doesn't have the right to sell kiba tusks and horns! No matter what you say, men can't live without copper plates!」

「What you say is true but...」

「If the number of kiba increases, they will attack the farms and trouble the farmers? Because the kiba will ravage the crops? And the farmers won't be able to earn copper plates by selling their crops? See, in the end, it's all for the sake of copper plates! Humans are living in order to earn copper plates! If we don't do that, we can only abandon the gods and live as savages in the Morga mountain!」

Savages were a type of humanoid that competed with Barb wolves and Madarama snakes for supremacy in the Morga mountain.

Anyway, this Zwei Tsun girl didn't have any pride and dignity of a denizen of Forest's Edge.

「May I ask... I don't think it's true, but is your mother from the city?」

「Huh? You are talking nonsense again! How is it possible for someone from the city to marry into Forest's Edge!」

「Indeed. But your clothes are similar in style with the people in the city. And the way you speak is like the people there too.」

「That's because— I don't like the clothes in Forest's Edge, so I modified this dress.」

Zwei Tsun pouted her lower lips unhappily.

5 勇者 (Yūsha)

The obsession in her eyes finally started dimming.

At this moment, I suddenly remembered. Back in the days, there was an anime about a hippo-like fairy, and Zwei Tsun was like the noisy girl who appeared there.

Never mind... Compared to the others in the Tsun clan, her personality isn't that bad.

I might be thinking that way because I wasn't a real denizen of Forest's Edge.

If she was from the city, I wouldn't feel any dislike for her even if I couldn't understand her. At the most, I would just shrug and think: 「There's no need to be so obsessed with money.」

However, her thinking was too strange for a denizen of Forest's Edge.

Vena Wu squinted her eyes and appeared to be more on guard.

Lala Wu looked extremely unhappy too.

If anyone refuted the pride of hunters, they would lose the respect of the denizens of Forest's Edge.

「Excuse me... We have cut all the meat...」

One of the branch house women said emotionlessly.

They all ignored Zwei Tsun.

「Thank you, everyone. Well then, let's start the fire in the stoves.」

We poured the water from the flask into the pot and lighted the firewood with rana grass.

While we waited for the water to boil, Zwei Tsun didn't shut up.

「Really now! After Mida ate your cooking, he kept making a scene every day! He did quiet down if we fed him, but he nonetheless started crying when he got hungry! Of course, Diga and Doddo got mad! You probably didn't want to come here, but you caused this problem, so you better take responsibility!」

「Responsibility, huh... By the way, did you all really chain him up?」

「Hmm? When he started throwing fits, he almost went to town by himself, so maybe that's true.」

「You aren't sure either? At least you didn't see him getting chained up, right?」

「I didn't. Only Yamiel's house has chains.」

Yamiel Tsun's house?

「Did Yamiel Tsun move out from the main house? Isn't she wearing the garments of an unwed woman?」

「She isn't married. But we have too many houses, so Yamiel and Diga have their own houses.」

I see. In that case, the only one who could chain up Mida Tsun and restrict his movement would be Yamiel Tsun.

How strange. I felt great discomfort when I heard about this from Yamiel Tsun, but then, I wasn't that bothered when I listened to this girl describe this event. Maybe I will get along unexpectedly well with Zwei Tsun.

As I was tidying my thoughts, the water started to boil.

「Alright, please put the kiba meat into the pot... There will be white 『foam』 forming on the surface, please scoop it out with a spoon. The soup will taste delicious if you do that.」

It had been a long time since I instructed others to cook 『Kiba meat soup』.

Lala Wu was teaching two Tsun clan women at the other pot, while Vena Wu and I were training the other three.

「... By the way, how old are you, Zwei Tsun? I'm seventeen.」

I asked while the soup was cooking, and Zwei Tsun pouted her lower lips unhappily.

「I'm twelve. What about it?」

「No, I was wondering whether you are older than Mida Tsun.」

She was too petite for a twelve-year-old, and I didn't expect such a young child to say something like: 「People live for the sake of earning copper plates」, which surprised me.

「Hmmp... How can I be older than Mida? I was born after Mida's mother passed away.」

「Ehh?」

「Mida's mother died during childbirth. My mother only gave birth to me.」

「Ah... is that so?」

Many hunters die young because of the nature of their work. So I have heard of many women who lost their husband remarry... But it was the opposite for the Tsun clan main house.

What Zwei Tsun said next shocked me.

「Yamiel's mother died shortly after childbirth. So did Diga Tsun and Doddo Tsun's mother. Only my mother lived for so long, how strange. My mother isn't that strong though.」

「Ehh? So all of you have different mothers?」

「That's right. What about it? 」

「Nothing... But I didn't know the women of Forest's Edge are so short-lived. 」

「Hmm? The Tsun clan is probably cursed. 」

Zwei Tsun shrugged when she said something so terrible and didn't seem concerned.

「Maybe they didn't long for this boring world... All of you always show such lifeless expressions, you won't live long if you keep frowning your faces. 」

The latter half of her words was directed at the women from the branch house.

They just kept on scooping the foams and grunted absent-mindedly in reply.

「Ah~ how annoying! I will feel moody just by staying with you all! 」

「... You can leave then... 」

Vena Wu couldn't help saying that.

「You have no intention of tending to the stove, so you don't need to be here, right...? Just what do you want...? 」

「Hmmp! I only came here to see the number one hero in the Forest's Edge! 」

Zwei Tsun looked up and glared at the sexy face high above her.

「Before the foreigner Asuta appeared, the number one hero in Forest's Edge was the clan head Zuro! That's why the Tsun clan can rule over Forest's Edge...! But in the future, it might be the Fa house who will rule Forest's Edge. 」

「... Looks like I can't converse with you properly... 」

「Hmmp! Because you haven't seen the truth of this world yet! 」

With these words, Zwei Tsun dashed nimbly out of the stove room.

For quite a long while, an unbearable silence shrouded the room.

「... The Tsun clan main house sure has interesting people. 」

I said to a branch house woman, and she answered curtly with a 「Yes. 」 .

Zwei Tsun was easier to get along with.

「... Okay, after scooping up the foam, cover it with a lid and wait for a moment. We will cook it with a small fire, then add in the aria. 」

One of the women picked up a squarish board to cover the pot.

But the board slid from her hands and fell into the pot.

「Ah!」

The youngest girl screamed and backed away.

The boiling soup splashed onto the girl's face and arm.

「Hyaa!」

The girl crashed onto the working platform, and some of the cut aria fell to the ground.

Now wasn't the time to care about the aria. I quickly grabbed the ladle in the water flask.

「Are you alright!? Don't move!」

I yelled loudly and splashed the water in the ladle onto the girl.

It was a crude way to do this, but I had no choice.

「Ahh...」

The girl lost her strength and collapsed onto the ground.

「Are you okay? Did it get into your eye?」

「... It's fine...」

The girl pursed her lips tightly as she held her left arm.

Her left shoulder, upper arm, left cheeks, and throat were all red.

「Uwah, that looks painful! Here, hurry and cool it.」

Lala Wu pressed a piece of wet cloth onto the girl's cheek.

「... Thank you...」

The girl lowered her eyelids weakly.

「... Sorry, Tulu Tsun.....」

At this moment, an emotionless voice came from above.

「Are you really sorry!? What are you going to do if it leaves a scar on her face!?」

Lala Wu blew her top and stood up.

She always had a short fuse, but this was the first time I saw her this mad.

The woman who made the mistake stood at the side with a blank expression. Tulu Tsun pulled Lala Wu's arm and said:

「... I'm fine... It's my fault, I shouldn't be dozing off there... And I dirtied the precious aria... I'm very sorry...」

「The aria doesn't matter... No, the aria is important too!」

Lala Wu scratched her head, and I sighed deeply.

We had stepped on the aria that was spilled, and most of it couldn't be used again.

「It can't be helped. We will cut more aria to make up for the shortage. Never mind that, I'm worried about your injury, you should put some medicine on it.」

「It's fine... We can't waste the precious medicine for such a small injury...」

「But—」

「... It's really fine... Thank you...」

Tulu Tsun looked at us with tearful eyes.

Her eyes were wavering uneasily— but compared to her dead fish-like eyes, this made her more human.

「Looks like we will need to cut ten more aria... I will get more from the main house's stove room...」

「No need.」

I shook my head in response to Vena Wu.

Aside from me, I didn't want the other women to move alone if they could help it.

「The main house is too far away, let's use the aria from this house first. Ermm, whose house is this?」

At this moment, Tulu who was squatting before me said:

「... This is my house...」

「I see. Excuse me, can you share ten aria with me? I will return the same amount to you later.」

「... We don't have any aria...」

「Ehh?」

「We had just used up all our aria... Sorry...」

The light in Tulu Tsun's eyes faded away rapidly.

Just like clear water contaminated by mud.

I looked at her eyes that had turned murky again, then turned to the woman who toppled the pot lid.

「What about your house, can you share some aria with us? Your house is closer than the main house, right?」

「... Sorry... The aria in our house is used up too...」

I stood up and looked at the other three ladies one by one.

「Anyone's house is fine, can you lend us some aria?」

「... Sorry...」

「Our house has run out of aria too...」

「If there wasn't a house head conference, we were planning to buy some from town...」

「I see.」

I smiled gently.

「I'm surprised that the aria in all the houses had run out. Is it the custom in the Tsun clan to buy more groceries after all the ingredients had run out?」

「... Yes...」

「By the way, can I borrow some poitan?」

「... No... The poitan is used up too...」

「I see.」

I said again.

「Alright then, let's take the aria we brought here. We brought extra aria with us, so it's not a problem. Can you two please go to the main house and bring ten aria here?」

「Alright...」

The two women slowly exited the stove room.

I looked at their back and the dissonance I sealed away in my heart started bloating up again.

Something was wrong.

Something was out of control.

Was this really a village in Forest's Edge?

If Vena Wu and Lala Wu weren't with me, I would definitely fall into panic, thinking I stumbled into yet another different world.

Everything here was incredibly twisted.

Part 4

Two hours later, we completed the 『Kiba meat soup』 in each of the branch houses and gathered in the stove room of the main house again.

Next, we had to grill the dried poitan and cook the meat dishes.

The sun just reached the midpoint between its peak and the horizon. We still had 3 and a half hours, everything was proceeding smoothly.

At this time, all the men had more or less gathered in that Ceremonial Hall and started the house head conference.

I prayed for Ai Fa and the others to have a good fight and started instructing the Tsun clan women how to grill the poitan.

「The poitan will solidify after being sunned, so add some water to dissolve it, making it gooey again. You can add water slowly with a ladle, but take care not to add too much.」

We didn't have any more extra poitan, so we had to be extra careful not to burn them.

I asked Shela Wu to demonstrate, and tore the poitan apart for everyone to try some.

「How does it taste? It's completely different from the poitan that had been cooked into a goo, correct?」

Half the Tsun clan women showed a slight change in emotions, and the other half was obviously startled.

They should find the grilled poitan tasty.

I could only pray that the poitan could move their hearts.

「Just the bloodlet kiba meat and grilled poitan will be enough to completely change how dinner tastes. Alright then, everyone please help me grill delicious poitan.」

By instructing them one-to-one, we let all of them try grilling poitan.

The 15 Tsun clan kins kept taking turns grilling poitan. If a poitan was about to be burned, the instructor would quickly assist. As the instructor was right beside them, it was quite difficult to fail.

And so, we spent an hour to grill 130 people worth of poitan.

After finishing the poitan, it was finally time for the meat dishes.

First, we had to make the marinating sauce for the 『Myam-roasted meat』.

「This is myam. We will be dicing the myam and aria, and mix it with fruit wine. A bottle of fruit wine will need one myam and 1.5 aria. We need to make plenty, so please make the marinating sauce in the pot, and put the meat into it.」

One portion of 『Myam-roasted meat』 required about 200 g of meat, which was about the same as the ones sold in the stall.

The 『Myam-roasted meat』 had to be served with one spare rib, 200 g of thigh steak, and fried aria.

While we were marinating the 『Myam-roasted meat』, we started slicing the meat for the steak. There were two more hours before dusk.

Everything was going smoothly.

I included additional buffer time for cooking, so I could use this chance to carefully prepare each dish.

「We should be able to finish before the conference ends... But can the Tsun clan women cook these dishes tomorrow?」

Mama Mia Lei said to me quietly.

「Hmm... I hope some of them will want to after having dinner...」

The future was dim.

Or rather— how much 「concern」 and 「will」 still lingered in these women's heart?

「If the Tsun clan village wasn't so far away, we could supervise them every day.」

Even Mama Mia Lei looked a little dejected.

Mama Mia Lei wanted to visit the Tsun clan village to teach the arrogant women like Yamiel Tsun or Zwei Tsun a lesson. But she didn't expect to face such a situation.

These women were like mud dolls, no matter how we admonished them, they wouldn't feel any pain. We couldn't change their attitude in one day.

「We have to see how the main house members and men will react. No matter what, Mida Tsun will be demanding for delicious dinner, and they need to satisfy him.」

If they want to enjoy tasty kiba meat, they would need to learn how to bloodlet and butcher, and finish their work as hunters properly. This required a change in the will of the Tsun clan men. What would the final results be?

I wondered if things were going smoothly on Ai Fa's end.

「Asuta, we have cut all the kiba meat and aria.」

Shela Wu notified me.

「Thank you... The marination is almost done, go ahead and grill the meat. Everyone, please gather at the stove outside.」

A large amount of smoke and aroma would come out when cooking 『Myam-roasted meat』, so we decided to do the demonstration outside.

「We will put the meat into the pot, stir it with a spatula, and take care not to burn it. A small amount will be fine for a start. Shela Wu, would you please?」

「Okay.」

Shela Wu grabbed a small piece of meat and placed it into the pot.

The fragrance of myam and fruit wine spread out, and the shoulders of several women quivered in surprise.

「It smells nice, right?」

I asked Tulu Tsun who was standing beside me with a warm smile.

Tulu Tsun's glass-like eyes wavered mindlessly.

「... It's very fragrant.」

「Yes, I have yet to meet a denizen of Forest's Edge who hates this smell.」

Myam had a strong aroma similar to garlic and was beloved by all the denizens of Forest's Edge.

「After grilling, pour some marinating sauce on it. That will make the taste stronger.」

By the way, I sliced the meat thicker than the ones I sold in the Post Station Town, and I reduced the marination time a little.

Besides, the participants for the house head conference only bought bowls for drinking soup, so I had to use fake rubber tree leaves in place of plates to serve 『Myam-roasted meat』. Hence, I had to prepare a large amount of sauce right now for each serving.

「Alright, it's done. Everyone, please try a bite...」

I heard a strange noise mid-sentence.

「Woaahhh...」 It had a very high pitch, like a bird on the verge of death.

「What's that sound?」

I walked away from the crowd and listened carefully.

The sound was heading straight for the stove room.

Ah! Could it be...!

The moment that idea appeared in my mind, my ominous prediction turned true. A large object akin to a meat bun rolled out from the shade of the houses.

It was about ten meters away from me.

The meat bun was aiming right for me.

「... Whhooooahhhh...」

He charged as he yelled.

At the same time, someone yelled: 「Asuta!」 and pounced on me.

I fell to the ground and felt an incredibly soft object holding me tightly.

I could see the vague figure of the meat bun through the strands of black hair in my field of view.

I will be trampled!

While I was paralyzed by fear, someone appeared with a black and long object.

It was a krilee stick used to carry pots.

A woman with chestnut hair threw the stick to the legs of the meat bun gracefully.

With a sharp 「Swoosh!」, the krilee stick tangled the elephant-like leg of the charging man.

「Whoaahhhh!」

The meat bun shouted again and fell to the ground.

He kept rolling right by us and stopped after hitting a tree.

「What the... Is he really human...?」

Our savior muttered angrily and then turned her drowsy eyes our way.

「It's fine now... You better get up before he does...」

「Yes... Thank you, Vena-nee.」

The person on top of me got up slowly.

「Asuta, are you fine?」

I was correct, the one smiling at me right now was Leina Wu.

「I-I'm alright, what about you?」

「I'm okay. Sorry for bumping into you so suddenly.」

She lowered her head in apology while straddling my stomach.

That body's warmth and soft sensation.

No matter what, this posture reminded me of what happened during the wedding banquet in the Lutim house.

And finally, Leina Wu stared at my face and intentionally got up slowly.

「How retarded... the way you protected him will just get the both of you trampled...」

「Yes, Vena-nee. I'm no match for you after all.」

Vena Wu looked unhappy while Leina Wu lowered her head bashfully. After glancing at the two sisters with complicated feelings in my heart, I got up quickly.

「Both of you, thank you. You saved my life.」

After Vena Wu glared at me sharply, she looked at the meat bun.

The meat bun— Mida Tsun— propped up his huge body with a blank expression, then stood up.

「Huh... What was Mida doing...?」

His voice was as shrill as a toddler.

It was Mida Tsun.

That was definitely him.

Great, he was safe. But he still looked like a monster.

「... Ah! That's right! Nice smell! There was a nice smell, so Mida rushed over here to see...?」

「You can only eat dinner after dusk! Before that, please wait patiently!」



A strong voice cut off Mida Tsun's puzzled words.

It was Mama Mia Lei.

Mida Tsun kept scowling his flat nose and got up by pulling on a tree.

「But... Mida is hungry...?」

「If you are hungry then chew on jerky! The other men are also bearing with it, you won't get any special treatment!」

Mama Mia Lei spoke sternly and stood before Mida Tsun.

Among the women of Forest's Edge, Mama Mia Lei could be considered burly, but she was like a petite child before Mida Tsun.

Even so, Mama Mia Lei still held her head and stared at the scary Mida Tsun who was two heads taller than her without being fazed.

「You are so uncultured! I have been meaning to ask, isn't your figure too outrageous? If you keep stuffing down food whenever you are hungry, you will mess up your body! Learn restraint!」

「... Uhmm...」

Mida Tsun grunted as if he was throwing a tantrum.

「But Mida...」

「No buts! The sun is still high, what are you doing!? The hunters should be in the forest chasing kiba now, right?」

She was right.

Mida Tsun puffed his round cheeks which made his face shake a little, and said unhappily:

「Today's job is done... Didn't Mida catch a large kiba?」

「Hmm? Is that true? Where is the kiba?」

「It's hanging in Yamiel's house... Look, Mida is telling the truth...」

Mida Tsun reached for the club on his waist suddenly, and I unconsciously strode forward.

Leina Wu grabbed my right arm and Vena Wu grabbed my left.

Mida Tsun moved the tip of the club to Mama Mia Lei's nose.

「Hmm... I see kiba fur and blood on it.」

「That's right... the kiba fell into a trap, and Mida finished it off...」

When she heard him say that, Mama Mia Lei smiled and slapped Mida Tsun's trunk-like arm.

「You did your job as a hunter properly. We will prepare a delicious meal for you, so wait patiently in your house. We are going to roast the meat now.」

「Hyyee.....」

Mida Tsun made a revolting sound, and his cheeks started shaking again. He was too fat, so there wasn't much change in his facial expression.

Vena Wu was still grabbing my left arm, and her grip was so strong that it hurt terribly. She was probably holding her emotions in.

And then, Mida Tsun looked my way.

His little pig-like eyes seemed lively.

「... You are really here... Yamiel didn't lie to Mida...」

「... Hello, it's been a while.」

「Mida is so happy... You will make yummy food for Mida, right...?」

「Yes. In order to let you eat delicious food from now on, I'm teaching the Tsun clan the way to make food more delicious.」

Mida Tsun seemed to understand what I was saying, and repeated himself: 「I'm so happy...」

「If you understand me, then go home and wait patiently. We still have loads of work to do.」

「Yes...」

After hearing Mama Mia Lei say that, his jaw shook a little.

He probably wanted to nod, but the fats stopped him from moving his neck.

「Promise...? Will you prepare loads and loads of yummy food for Mida...?」

「Yes, look forward to it.」

Mida Tsun slowly turned and started to leave.

I sighed in relief in my heart—

At this moment, inspiration struck.

「Mida Tsun! I want to buy aria from you with copper plates, does the main house have any?」

Mama Mia Lei turned her head back in surprise.

Mida Tsun turned his entire body towards me.

「We spilled aria onto the ground by accident, so we are a little short. I want to buy any extra aria you have... Is that okay? 」

「... The food store is barred...」

Mida Tsun said in a high-pitched voice.

「To stop Mida from stealing the food, they barred the food store...」

「I see, that's a pity... Aria tastes good, right? 」

Mida Tsun blinked his animal-like eyes which didn't show any emotions.

「... Mida doesn't know the name of the vegetables though...? 」

「I see. The food you bought in the Post Station Town had aria in them.」

「... Yes...」

Mida Tsun pouted his small mouth disinterestedly.

「... If you want to take down the bar, Mida can get Yamiel to come over...」

「Ah, it's fine. We will try to make do with what we have on hand, thank you.」

「Mida is hungry...」

Mida Tsun muttered depressedly, then turned and left.

「He isn't a bright kid... But he has an adorable side, right? 」

「... Don't joke with me...」

Vena Wu was still clinging to my arm as she slid down onto the ground.

「Ugghhh, how disgusting... Why is that youngest son always showing up...」

「Haha, Vena-nee really hates the youngest son of the Tsun clan.」

Leina Wu showed an innocent smile as she held onto my right arm.

「By the way, Asuta, are we really short on aria? We should have enough to complement the meat dishes, right? 」

Mama Mia Lei asked puzzledly, and I squeezed out a smile in a hurry.

「That's right, it's fine even if the Tsun clan doesn't have any aria. We can manage with our supplies.」

As eight portions had been canceled, there was still plenty of aria in stock.

The two beautiful sisters still clung to my arms as I looked behind me.

The food store beside the stove room was always closed.

He said that the food store is barred... Then how do they access it?

The unanswered question in my heart started taking vague shapes.

Chapter 2 - House Head Conference

Part 1

Finally, when the sun reached the western edge of the sky, we finished all the dishes.

There were some mishaps while we were cooking. But aside from the appearance of Mida Tsun, we weren't disturbed by anyone else from the Tsun clan main house. In a way, the job was over in a blink of an eye.

However, we still couldn't let our guard down. The other party didn't interfere when we were cooking, but they might have some devious scheme or traps for us during or after dinner.

The reason they asked us to come here was neither curiosity about me nor Mida Tsun's tantrums. There must be a more serious reason.

Were they trying to make me theirs because I could earn a huge amount of copper plates?

Or did they think I was an eyesore and wanted to get rid of me?

I didn't know what their true objective was.

However, they were definitely up to no good.

And so, I didn't relax my tense emotions after the dishes were done and started distributing the meal.

「— Sorry to intrude.」

Vena Wu and I carried the reheated pot of 『Kiba meat soup』 to the Ceremonial Hall while numerous pairs of sharp gazes locked on us.

The sun was about to set, and the Ceremonial Hall was darker than outside. The candle stands at the corners of the rooms were already lighted. Illuminated by the orange light, the eyes of all the buffed Forest's Edge men were burning like beasts.

The house head conference was now in recess.

But the atmosphere was unbearably tense.

Vena Wu and I walked through the tense air and headed to the stove by the wall.

As its appearance suggested, the inside of the Ceremonial Hall looked like a cave. The floor was about a meter below ground level, which made the ceiling look even taller and wider.

There were four pillars inside the hall connected to beams. Wood columns radiated out from the beams to support the dome-shaped roof. The deterioration inside the hall wasn't as serious as the exterior.

Stoves were set up on the four walls, and we placed the pot on the stove nearest to the entrance. When we started the fire, the men were still silent.

The chief Tsun clan and the heads of 36 houses were gathered inside the Ceremonial Hall.

The male followers accompanying the house heads were also here.

There were more than 70 people inside the Ceremonial Hall, but I didn't hear any whispering or chattering. Everyone sat on their rugs and watched our every move quietly. The men all wore hunter's cape, and the blades were all kept in a corner.

There were four entrances to the Ceremonial Hall. The other women entered from the other entrances with their pots. Everyone kept quiet, as if we all agreed on this ahead of time.

I didn't think the hearth caretaker had to greet everyone. When we started the fire and was about to leave the Ceremonial Hall, to bring in the other dishes—

A voice finally broke the silence.

「Hearth caretaker of the Fa house, women from the Wu clan and Lutim house... thank you for your hard work.」

His voice sounded slurred for some reason, so it was a bit hard to make out what he was saying.

I slowly looked in the direction where the voice came from.

「So it is the kiba meat that the people in the Post Station Town are willing to spend copper plates for... I can finally taste it...」

A large man was sitting there, with two other men sitting by his side.

This might be a circular building, but that man's seat was probably the seat of honor. Behind him was a strange altar, with the skull of a large kiba looking down from above.

So this is the head of the Tsun clan Zuro Tsun...

That was definitely him.

Because seated on both sides of him were the eldest and second son of the Tsun clan, Diga Tsun and Doddo Tsun.

Diga Tsun looked at me with a mocking smile.

Doddo Tsun stared my way like a famished wild dog.

Zuro Tsun was seated between his sons; his toothy smile sent shivers down my spine.

Hmm...

Contrary to my expectation, he wasn't fierce or intimidating.

However, he had a strange air about him.

His body was massive and one size bulkier than Diga Tsun.

It wasn't as bad as Mida Tsun, but he was quite fat.

His hair was sparse, and his eyes and cheeks drooped down in a hideous manner. The wideness of his mouth was amazing, like a toad that got bloated after being soaked in water for too long.

Zuro Tsun was wearing clothes commonly seen in Forest's Edge. But like the women of Forest's Edge, there were bunches of accessories on his fat arms and legs.

On his chest was an amazing amount of tusks and horns.

The denizens of Forest's Edge treated such necklace as a hunter's pride and proof of a hunter. But in my eyes, Zuro Tsun was just treating it as a symbol of vanity.

Given his body shape, he can't do any hunting...

In terms of just body figure, Mida Tsun was closer to being a meatball. But he still possessed physical prowess, such as ability to sprint fast, as well as enormous arm strength.

However, people with large statures would normally have an intimidating air about them, but I couldn't sense this from Zuro Tsun.

His sitting posture was terrible, slouching slightly to the right as he sat cross-legged.

His beady eyes had the glint of obsession, while his expression looked lazy.

This person ill befitted the title of the tribal chief of the righteous and serious hunters.

「What's the matter... I'm thanking you, you know...?」

He smiled with his huge mouth and said with his slurred voice again.

「It's nothing.」

I bowed.

「I'm working in exchange for remuneration, so there is no need for thanks.」

I answered in a tone which was as calm as possible, and the corner of Zuro Tsun's lips rose higher.

「That's true, I said something careless... Carry on then.」

「Alright, excuse me.」

We quietly resumed our work.

The Tsun clan women returned to their own home, and the food was served by the women from the Wu clan and Lutim house.

As the air in the Ceremonial Hall was incredibly heavy, the usually cheerful ladies were also affected. Their faces were all incredibly stiff.

「... We need to eat there too...?」

When we left the Ceremonial Hall and returned to the stove room, Vena Wu muttered to herself exasperatedly.

「That's right. This is the rule of Forest's Edge.」

The women from the Tsun clan branch houses had to return to their own homes to serve the food to their family. Because of the rule that the 『Hearth caretaker must eat together with the diners』, I thought the branch house members would also dine in the Ceremonial Hall. Looked like they had relaxed this rule.

I was very surprised that Yamiel Tsun and Mida Tsun didn't dine in the Ceremonial Hall.

「My mood is so heavy... There won't be any danger if Papa Donda is with us... But the atmosphere there is terrible...」

The feuding Tsun clan and Wu clan were gathered in the same place along with their kins, of course the air would be stiff.

Just how intense were their debates during the house head conference?

Did Ai Fa complete her job properly while the two sides were standing off?

What did the other house heads think after listening to her?

I needed to dine without knowing anything, which increased the stress on me.

Even so, I still had to complete my own work.

After carrying in the 『Kiba meat soup』, we carried in the grilled poitan, 『Myam-roasted meat』 with aria, thigh steak, and spare ribs into the Ceremonial Hall. With the soup given out to everyone, the distribution of the food was finally done.

「...Asuta, over here.」

After finishing my work, I heard Ai Fa calling out to me. Vena Wu and I walked over.

Familiar faces were gathered to the right of the seat of honor.

Donda Wu, Darum Wu, Dan Lutim, Rau Lei— all 14 kins of the Wu clan and Ai Fa were seated here.

Mama Mia Lei and Leina Wu had already joined them. They also placed Vena Wu and my share of the food at our seats.

「Everyone's safe, that's great.」

I sat down beside Ai Fa and whispered to her.

Ai Fa had her usual serious face.

「... How goes the house head conference?」

「I can't really say. After the head of the Tsun clan heard what we said, he just kept smiling and insisted we discuss more after dinner.」

Since the dishes being sold at the Post Station Town were a part of tonight's menu, that might be prudent.

「What about the other things? Like Doddo Tsun's violent action in the Post Station Town, or them barging into the Lutim house wedding banquet. This conference is the chance to tell on them, right?」

「They glossed over it in the usual way. If the head of the Tsun clan lowers his head in apology, these matters will be put to rest.」

Kaslan Lutim also told me about this trick of theirs.

If their wayward acts were ever to surface, the head of the Tsun clan would use his ultimate move — 「apologizing」.

Their pride was worthless.

But— it's because of people like him that causes the matter to be so complicated.

Shameless people are the scariest.

When I met Doddo Tsun for the first time, I learned this fact personally.

「... Well then, let's dine in...」

The leader of the shameless said with a slurred voice.

「We talked about the hearth caretaker from the Fa house during our conference earlier, and this is his cooking. Let us taste this carefully...」

He then said the familiar phrase:

「... We give thanks to the grace of the forest... We give thanks to the member of the Fa house, the Wu clan and their kins, and the Tsun clan for letting us extend our lives tonight...」

As almost everyone here was men, deep voices echoed in the hall as they repeated his words.

Everyone then picked up their utensils.

... What comments will they give?

This wasn't just a normal dinner. In a sense, this was closer to a taste-test session.

The new techniques of bloodletting and butchering change the kiba meat. We hope to give value to kiba meat, so everyone could trade them for copper plates. In order to achieve this goal, with the assistance of the Wu clan and Lutim house, the Fa house is currently setting up shop in the Post Station Town— before dinner began, we told the house heads of Forest's Edge these details.

The kins of the Tsun clan, the kins of the Wu clan, the smaller houses not affiliated with either side... what did their house heads think— we were still figuring things out, so we could only take things one step at a time.

「... Hey Molun, why is there just one spare rib for everyone? How can one spare rib satisfy my stomach?」

Dan Lutim intentionally lowered voice entered my ears.

「We had to prepare 130 meals, you know? It's tough enough to give one rib to each person, so stop complaining.」

「But...」

「I get it I get it. I will give you my share, so be quiet... But I will take your 『Myam-roasted meat』 in return, okay?」

What a peaceful conversation between father and daughter. In this tense atmosphere, their bold actions made me feel at ease.

Alright, I will offer my spare rib to Dan Lutim too. As I was about to turn to him, someone spoke.

「Is that it? I was wondering just how delicious this could be, but it's just normal kiba meat.」

The one who spoke was Diga Tsun.

The heir of the Tsun clan continued in a slow tone:

「Did you really earn more than a hundred white copper plates with this thing? Unbelievable.」

I started considering my options.

Well, I already knew that the Tsun clan could either criticize or praise my cooking, looked like they decided to bash my cooking first.

「Eldest son of the Tsun clan Diga Tsun, are you talking to yourself, or questioning the Fa house? If you are questioning us, I can answer your question.」

Diga Tsun glared at me with his murky eyes.

On the day Ai Fa picked me up in the depths of the forest, Diga Tsun was lying in wait near the Fa house. That was the first time I met him, and he was the second denizen of Forest's Edge that I encountered.

After a month or so, I saw him again. He barged into the Lutim house wedding together with Doddo Tsun and Mida Tsun.

This was our third meeting— I wasn't afraid of this person at all. But I learned once again how arrogant and sly he was.

「Yes... The head of the Fa house only mentioned that they earned more than a hundred white copper plates in ten days... Can you tell us the details now...?」

Diga Tsun's father asked.

I put down my plate.

「Firstly, regarding the accuracy of this statement, I can give you a definite answer. What Ai Fa said is true. We sold more than a thousand dishes within ten days and took in more than 200 white copper plates. Excluding the ingredients and other costs, the profits are 123 white copper plates, which is around 100 kiba worth of tusks and horns.」

The house heads were eating quietly, but now they were whispering among themselves.

In order to stop others from thinking that I was showing off, I announced our gains as calmly as possible.

「However, we didn't prepare enough portions during our first few days of opening, so the sales numbers were lackluster. Nowadays, we can sell 150 meals a day, and earn between 17 to 18 white copper plates... Two days later, we will provide meals for an inn, and our profits will exceed 20 white copper plates.」

「Earning 20 white copper plates a day... That is an incredible number.」

Zuro Tsun laughing voice reverberated in the hall.

「... Are sales so impressive because the stall owner is a foreigner? The residents of Genos loathe the denizens of Forest's Edge, will they really buy kiba meat from us...?」

「Obviously, we had to spend time to build up our reputation with the people of the town. The women from the Wu clan were also helping out at my stall, so the townspeople got to know how the denizens of Forest's Edge really are through them. Their baseless prejudice and fear will fade away one day.」

I continued with slightly more strength in my eyes.

So it depended on whether the fear the people in the city had towards the Forest's Edge is really baseless. If the denizens of Forest's Edge did commit felonies, that will be a different matter.— *If you want to obtain more wealth, then stop your nefarious ways*— that was what I was hinting at.

Zuro Tsun still showed a faint smile on his face.

Never mind, if something of this level could change the behavior of the Tsun clan, we wouldn't need to work so hard. I sighed in my heart.

「Not everyone present would want to interact with Genos in such a manner. But the Fa house isn't doing this for the money. I hope everyone can understand this.」

「Yes... I heard that your plan is to make the Forest's Edge more prosperous...」

Why?

Why couldn't I deduce what Zuro Tsun was thinking?

His toad-like face had a faint smile, and there wasn't any obvious malice despite his insulting tone. He seemed uninterested in this matter.

If he showed his obsession for copper plates openly like Zwei Tsun, I would have an easier time dealing with him. But I couldn't understand what he was scheming, so I didn't know what to emphasize.

Why did he ask me to come to the Tsun clan...?

Zuro Tsun continued dining with a faint smile on his face.

Diga Tsun was also biting into the kiba meat with a silly smile.

Doddo Tsun— I wasn't paying attention to him at all, but was he eating the food properly? He kept drinking fruit wine.

「However... Do we need wealth...?」

After staying quiet for a while, Zuro Tsun finally said in a hoarse voice.

「Wealth will make people depraved... As the tribal chief of Forest's Edge, I often meet with the people of Rock City. I understand more than everyone here how much this rings true... Excessive wealth is like wine that leads down the path to debauchery...」

Did he have to right to say such things?

But there was no point in lecturing the Tsun clan here.

So I shut my mouth, but there was someone who couldn't stay silent. That was the head of the Lutim house, Dan Lutim.

「Tribal chief Zuro Tsun, if you know that, then why are you keeping all the prize money from the city to yourself? If you think excessive wealth is like evil wine, then you should return the money to Rock city, right?」

He didn't sound agitated, but his unhappiness was obvious.

After saying that, Dan Lutim bit into the spare rib in his hand.

Ema Min Lutim seemed to have given him the third rib.

「Dan Lutim, that's a retarded question.」

A young voice answered.

It came from diagonally behind me, which meant that the one answering wasn't from the Tsun clan.

The one who spoke was the head of the Lei house, Rau Lei.

「Dan Lutim, don't you understand how kind and merciful the tribal chief is? In order to keep us safe from harm, he had drunk all that evil wine by himself. Can't you understand such a simple matter?」

「So that's why.」

Dan Lutim laughed out loud.

The next instant, several black figures sitting to the left of the Tsun clan emitted strong bloodlust.

「Heads of the Lei and Lutim houses! Are you trying to slander the tribal chief clan without any proof? The tribal chief already explained many times that the copper plates are all used to protect the Genos farmland!」

A buffed man wearing a fur cape with the kiba skull still attached said.

One of them who was incredibly swole said in a deep voice on par with Donda Wu:

「That's right, the tribal chief sincerely thinks that Forest's Edge didn't need this wealth, so he hired people from the city to gather wood and erect wall to protect the farms of Genos. You have no reason to slander him!」

「Head of house Zaza, the things you mentioned are the ones without proof. You make the same excuse every year, I'm already tired of hearing it.」

Dan Lutim continued chewing on his rib calmly. That made the head of house Zaza even more furious.

「I have witnessed that wall being built myself! In order to erect such a grand wall, dozens of Genos men need to be hired to work on it, and large amounts of copper plates and time will be spent!」

A wall to protect the farms?

Did the Tsun clan really build such a thing?

If what those men said was true, Uncle Dora the vegetable peddler won't need to worry about kiba.

「... They are referring to the northern farms. As the people from inside the rock wall own these farms, secured wooden wall was erected to protect the fields from kiba— Grandma Jiba told me about that a long time ago.」



Ai Fa whispered to me.

I see. The farms of the Post Station Town citizens were located to the south of the city, and that wall didn't extend that far. Hence, the farms to the south were ravaged by the famished kiba.

「The Tsun clan claimed that the erection of that wall exhausted all the prize money... But is that possible?」

I asked Ai Fa as quietly as possible so others wouldn't overhear. Ai Fa shook her head.

「Impossible. Grandma Jiba once said that the wall that protect the noble's farms was completed decades ago. It goes without saying that they would need to be maintained if hungry kiba damages the wall.」

「Yes...」

「Besides, Grandma Jiba once said with a laugh that the prize money given by the Rock City is meagre, so it can't be used to erect such grandiose wall.」

In the end, even the house head of Zaza was tricked by the Tsun clan.

The Tsun clan actually conned such scary people, I couldn't help sighing.

All of them looked as intimidating as Donda Wu...

They were perfect specimens as the denizens of Forest's Edge.

Having the life force and aura of wild beast, the pure and powerful tribe of 「hunters」 ... The kin houses of the Tsun clan, Zaza, Dom and the Jean, all looked strong and outstanding, and were fitting of this name.

The eyes of the swole Zaza head were burning from outlandish rage as he glared at Dan Lutim and Rau Lei.

「Excessive wealth will make the hunters depraved! That's why the tribal chief used all the money to protect the Genos farms, and didn't bring it back to Forest's Edge! What problem do you have against tribal chief's decision?」

「If what you said is true, we won't have any qualms about it. But head of the Zaza house, how many years do we have to wait until work on that wall is finished? I have waited so long that my neck is getting as long as the Totos in the Post Station Town.」

Dan Lutim answered without any agitation at all. He seemed so tired of this exchange that he almost yawned.

They must have said the same thing during previous house head conferences. The kins of the Wu clan would point out the shortcomings of the chief clan, the kins of the Tsun clan would protect

the chief clan. The Tsun clan managed to hold on to their chief clan status because of this strange power balance.

Donda Wu didn't participate in this meaningless debate and drank his fruit wine with a terrifying fire burning in his eyes.

The Tsun clan is doing things too sloppily...

If a conflict started between the Tsun and Wu clans, the Forest's Edge would be embroiled in a civil war that could split it in two. But that was only if the kins of each clan joined in. Without the aid of their powerful kins such as Zaza and Jean, the Tsun clan won't be a match for the Wu clan.

Even so, the Tsun clan still depended on deception to earn the trust of their kins. Their scheme seemed so easy to defeat.

The Tsun clan's methods are full of holes. Kamyua or I could easily tear apart their lies with slightly underhanded schemes.

Such a thought even came to my mind.

I knew that I shouldn't be overconfident, but the Tsun clan's poor imitation of civilization was too rough on the edges and had plenty of holes.

As I was thinking about it, the other party suddenly lashed out:

「... The Fa house is attempting to bring excessive wealth to Forest's Edge, that will only cause depravity to the denizens of Forest's Edge!」

I raised my head in surprise.

The Zaza house head was glaring at Ai Fa and me with hunter-like eyes.

「I don't care if you seduced a foreigner and used him to earn copper plates. That isn't a violation of the rules of Forest's Edge... However, if you try to bring down the morals in Forest's Edge with that wealth, I will purge you with my blade!」

They suddenly shifted the topic to us.

No, it wasn't sudden at all. After hearing Ai Fa's speech during the house head conference, they were probably harboring such thoughts.

Excessive wealth might bring depravity to Forest's Edge— I was also worried about that when I thought to open shop in the Post Station Town.

Kaslan Lutim and Ai Fa wiped away my worries.

Ai Fa was now staring right back at the Zaza house head with her back straight in a proper sitting posture.

「Head of the Zaza house, you think that excessive wealth will make the denizens of Forest's Edge deprave?」

「That's right. If you want to earn copper plates with kiba meat, that's up to you. But don't splurge that money in Forest's Edge... However, if the Wu clan and Lutim house want to wag their tails to the Fa house, you can share some of the copper plates with them, I will turn a blind eye to that.」

「Oh...?」

Dan Lutim's huge body shook.

With a happy smile on his face, his large eyes were starting to boil with emotion.

「Head of the Zaza house, you said something interesting. You think we built bonds with the Fa house for the sake of copper plates?」

「Am I wrong? The Fa and Lutim houses have no blood ties, so why else will you act together?」

「Because the Fa and Lutim houses are friends!」

Dan Lutim roared and slammed his fist into the ground.

The dirt-covered rugs sunk in.

「Blood ties are important, but that's not everything! Forget it, you will do whatever the Tsun clan says just because you are their kin. There's no way you can understand how we think!」

「Are you trying to mock the chief clan again!?」

The atmosphere in the hall reached boiling point.

At this moment, someone mediated between them. It wasn't the leaders of these two men, Donda Wu or Zuro Tsun, but Ai Fa.

「Lutim and Zaza house heads, please calm down. We are discussing excessive wealth, right?」

A serious glint flashed in Ai Fa's eyes.

But her tone and expression were calm.

Ai Fa nodded at Dan Lutim to soothe him, then turned to the Zaza house head— and said quietly.

Part 2

「Excessive wealth will bring depravity to Forest's Edge... I understand what you think, but we weren't trying to earn great riches when we chose to start a business in the Post Station Town.」

Ai Fa continued intermittently.

「I only wish for a prosperous life for the denizens of Forest's Edge. There are many denizens in Forest's Edge living in extreme poverty, if their lives become better, they would obtain more power and put in more effort into their work as hunters.」

「Hah!」

The head of the Zaza house cleared his throat crudely and said:

「Is that really true? If a kiba can be traded in for more copper plates, they can survive without needing to hunt more kiba. That's being depraved!」

「Can they perform their jobs as hunters properly if they are starving? Leaving big houses like Zaza, Jean and Dom aside, the smaller and weaker houses also need to live a better life.」

「... If they lacked the ability, let them wither away in the forest. That's how we train the power of our hunters.」

A deep voice interjected.

Until just now, this buffed man wearing a skull of a kiba had been listening to his comrades quietly. He was a member of the Dom house.

「Weak hunters don't have the rights to live. The strong hunters that survive will allow the tenacious bloodline to carry on. If the useless wealth allowed weak hunters to survive and their floundering heritage is passed on, it will lead to the Forest's Edge's demise.」

「What is useless wealth? How do you know that the wealth earned through kiba tusks and horns is useful, while the one made from kiba meat is useless?」

A blue flame raged in Ai Fa's eyes.

「Head of the Dom house, the tusks, horns, hide and meat are all wealth brought in by kiba. Can you explain what is their difference?」

「... We had been using tusks, horns and hide to trade for wealth for the past eight decades. That is my answer.」

「That's because we couldn't trade kiba meat for money in the past, right? Since we have learned how to sell kiba meat, I think we shouldn't just abandon it.」

Ai Fa's tone turned a little gentler, but her aura did not lose out to the fierce head of the Dom house.

「Head of the Dom house, I spoke with the Grand Elder of the Forest's Edge last night.」

「... What about it, head of the Fa house.」

「I was puzzled. The people in the city exchange the meat and hide of an animal called karon for money. But the denizens of Forest's Edge only trade in kiba hide for money but throw the meat away into the forest. Why is that?」

I was listening in last night too.

Only then did we learn of the unknown history of Forest's Edge.

「Jiba Wu and other denizens of Forest's Edge once lived in the dark jungle in Jaguar. Aside from the giant dark apes that ate humans, there were only small snakes and lizards in the jungle... As the people were strictly prohibited from eating dark ape meat, they could only sustain themselves on snakes, lizards, and bugs.」

「I heard all that in the Dom house too. It's nothing special, our ancestors kept hunting dark apes to protect themselves and their families and honed their skills as hunters.」

「You are right. Our forebears skinned the dark apes and wore their hides to display their abilities... Simply put, this was the reason why we could skin hides, but couldn't process the meat properly.」

「.....」

「After that, our ancestors moved from the southern jungle to the edge of the Morga Forest. They didn't hunt dark apes anymore and switched to hunting kiba. They could eat kiba meat now, but didn't know the correct way to handle this meat. According to Jiba Wu, just getting to eat kiba meat satisfied them and filled them with joy.」

「And so? If that is the case, we should be satisfied with just eating the meat.」

「No... I don't think so.」

Ai Fa must be thinking about the expression Jiba Wu showed last night.

Jiba Wu's eyes were strange back then. Even though they were overflowing with sorrow, they had a glimmer of hope in them.

「Jiba Wu thinks that the denizens of Forest's Edge back then were too lazy. They rejected any interaction with the people in the city and didn't attempt to determine the reason why kiba meat couldn't be traded for copper plates. Eight decades were wasted, and Jiba Wu is filled with regrets.」

「Why does she feel regret? There is no need for our forebears to feel that way. If not for the path they had shown us, we won't be here today.」

「Jiba Wu thinks that they could have shown a more prosperous path for us, that's why she feels regret. If life in Forest's Edge wasn't so harsh, many of our ancestors wouldn't have died in vain.」

Back then, several thousand refugees settled in Forest's Edge, at the foot of the Morga Mountain.

In the first few years, almost half the denizens died while battling kiba or wasted away from hunger. Jiba Wu told me that when I met her for the first time.

「The people in the city already knew the correct way to prepare kiba meat. If our forebears didn't discriminate against the people in the city and had build proper relations with them, we could have trade kiba meat to them for copper plates. Because they were apathetic, Forest's Edge is so impoverished that denizens still starve to death in their own homes. Grandma Jiba feels that this is their sin.」

「.....」

「Head of the Dom house, I can't refute your belief that excess wealth will invite depravity. However, I believe that more wealth will make the weak and smaller houses stronger. I hope that the denizens of Forest's Edge won't ever need to starve.」

Ai Fa glanced at me.

「You might think my proposal is ridiculous. But with Asuta's prowess, I don't think it is impossible... Does everyone think Asuta's cooking is delicious?」

No one answered.

Even so, Ai Fa's eyes turned calm and serene. She then lifted the corners of her lips.

「I think the dishes are wonderful and delicious. That's why, I will strive on this path that I believe in... I hope you can agree with me.」

The Ceremonial Hall was completely silent.

Most of the people had yet to finish their meal, but everyone stopped what they were doing.

Be it the Tsun clan and their kins, or the Wu clan and their kins— the women tending to the hearth, the heads of the minor houses, everyone stopped with bated breath because of this wondrous feeling—

At this moment, someone broke the silence.

「... The Fou house concurs with the head of the Fa house.」

Everyone looked at the source of the voice.

A middle-aged man stood up from a corner of the Ceremonial Hall.

「The Fou house is a small house and has few kins, so couldn't hunt enough kiba.」

The man who was about forty had a black messy hair, a similarly colored beard. He was tall and thin.

「We have abundant meat, but insufficient tusks and horns. A child was finally born to us, but it almost starved to death. If our men have more power, our family won't suffer so much.」

His light blue eyes burned in the dim hall.

There was a mixture of the pride and pain of a hunter in his eyes, which gave off a terrifying light.

「We don't need any charity from Rock City. But I think the wealth I get by hunting kiba is my just reward. If we can gain more strength from this, I swear that we will put in more effort into my work as a hunter... Hence, the Fou house concurs with what the head of the Fa house said.」

「... The Latzu house also concurs.」

A man stood up from the side.

It was a man in his twenties.

「In this year, we lost two of our kin houses, the Mei and Jimu houses. The head of the Mei house was an exceptionally brave hunter, but he became ill because of a small wound and passed away... If we had more savings, we could have bought medicine from the Post Station Town and cured him.」

His eyes were full of rage as he glared at the head of the Dom house.

「According to the Dom house head, weak houses like Mei and Jimu deserves to die out. I don't agree with his assertions, that's why I concur with the Fa house head.」

「No need to be so agitated. The Dom house head doesn't wish for the demise of the smaller houses either.」

A hoarse voice sounded out, and someone else stood up.

The one speaking was a thin old man, who had white hair like Jiba Wu.

「There are 300-odd denizens in Forest's Edge who aren't related to the Tsun clan or Wu clan by blood. No one should treat their lives lightly. If the smaller houses die out slowly, we wouldn't be able to hunt enough kiba.」

「You are the elder of the Sauti clan... Do you concur with the Fa house head too?」

The Zaza house head who had been quiet stared at the old man with fiery eyes.

「That will be decided by my house head. However, after listening to the Grand Elder's words, these old bones feel the same way. Because of the wrong path chosen by we old fools, the young ones had to take unnecessary winding roads.」

The old man was a denizen of Forest's Edge, but his eyes were steady and calm.

His gentle eyes turned from the Zaza house head to me and Ai Fa.

「The people of the city fear the denizens of Forest's Edge, Forest's Edge denizens are also wary of the people of the city. This might be an unavoidable fate, but we didn't try to do anything about it... Maybe the Fa house can open a new path for Forest's Edge in the stead of us old ones.」

「How can that foreigner do something that incredible!?」

「He can build proper bonds with the people in the city. This is something no one from Forest's Edge can do.」

After the old man answered steadily, the Zaza house head's face turned even more ferocious, and his cheeks started cramping.

「Not just the kins of the Wu clan, even the Sauti clan wants to slander the chief clan? Don't forget that it was the Tsun clan that forged our ties with Rock City!」

「It is true that the Tsun clan forged ties with the Genos city. But the citizens in Rock City are different from the people of the Post Station Town... Unfortunately, the Tsun clan people didn't build proper relationships with the people in town. Did you forget? The second son of the main house drew his blade in town.」

「That's because the people of Post Station Town berated the denizens of Forest's Edge...」

「Zaza house head, is there a rule in Forest's Edge that compels us to draw our blades when we are insulted?」

Aside from the Tsun clan, there were actually other clans that dared to disparage the Tsun clan. I was surprised.

The old man smiled quietly and looked our way.

「Head and family of the Fa house, an old fool like me can't decide the path the Sauti clan should take. But I wish to offer you my blessings.」

「Elder Moga, if you really think that, then don't neglect your house head.」

The young man beside the elder stood up majestically.

He had a bulky figure and was a young man with his own style just like Jiza Wu or Kaslan Lutim.

「I'm the head of the Sauti clan, Dali Sauti. I have a question for the head of the Wu clan Donda Wu. What are your views on this matter?」

Donda Wu stared at the young man quietly.

「The head of the Lutim house calls the Fa house his friend. But the ones actually assisting the Fa house are the women from the Wu clan. Do you also think of the Fa house as friends, and are working towards the same goal?」

「... I have no intentions of calling those people friends.」

Donda Wu's voice was deep and vague, he stood up slowly.

「That dummy is a woman, but works hard to pretend to be a hunter every day. That foreigner is of dubious origin, why must I treat them as friends?」

「In that case, why did you lend him the Wu clan's women? Is it just for the money?」

The young man named Dali Sauti tilted his head with a puzzled face.

Donda Wu stared at his honest face, and said quietly:

「They want to give value to kiba meat for it to become exchangeable for copper plates. I don't think such dream talk will come true that the retards in the city will change their mind. I merely lend him the women as part of a proper trade.」

「I see, then—」

「However, if their delusions come true, then Forest's Edge will obtain enormous strength.」

Donda Wu's stern voice was like a machete, cutting off the young man's words.

His eyes started shining, and a fearless smile formed on his lips.

「The excessive wealth will lead to the denizens of Forest's Edge becoming deprave... How can such a retarded thing be possible? People who think that way are the ones that will make Forest's Edge depraved.」

「What did you say...?」

The men from the Zaza and Jean house responded immediately.

「Zaza, Jean, if you all had 100 copper plates, will you play around all day and only start hunting kiba when you spend all your copper plates?」

「Head of the Wu clan! What kind of joke is this!? Are you trying to mock us too!」

「Your outraged reaction is the answer.」

Donda Wu was still smiling.

Speaking of which, even though his face always looked sour recently, he was finally showing his true nature now.

He was a fiery heroic figure who could always crush his enemy with a smile.

「Head of the Zaza house, I'm not mocking you, it is you who are mocking us. You think excessive wealth will make the denizens of Forest's Edge fall into depravity? These kind of people are unfit to be hunters in the first place! They have no right to live in Forest's Edge!」

「But...!」

「If anyone falls into depravity because of wealth, we will just need to chase them out of Forest's Edge. We can keep the peace and order in Forest's Edge this way.」

Donda Wu's mouth twisted cheerfully.

He was insulting the Tsun clan in a roundabout way, declaring war against the Tsun clan.

The head of the Zaza house didn't understand what he was implying and showed a ferocious face after hearing Donda Wu's words.

「The Wu clan didn't need any more wealth. It's the same for the Lutim and Lei houses... But the Lilim and Mufa houses are still lacking in power. Without the aid of their kins, they might die out just like the Mei and Jimu houses.」

「.....」

「However, when the Fa house started doing business in the Post Station Town, the Wu clan obtained more wealth. Because we lent our women to the Fa house, we didn't have enough people to tan the hides, and had to share them with the Lilim and Mufa houses... That's probably the so-called 『making lives more prosperous』. Am I wrong, Zaza house head?」

「.....」

「Life in Forest's Edge isn't so well off that people will fall into depravity. We can worry about that when no denizen of Forest's Edge starves to death.」

「Donda Wu, so you have the same goal as the Fa house?」

Dali Sauti interjected.

Donda Wu's feral smile disappeared, and his face turned stiff with impatience.

「I already said this, right? I don't believe in such dream talk.」

「But—」

「If they really pulled it off, the denizens of Forest's Edge would obtain enormous strength... There's no reason for us to stop them, right?」

「Ara ara...」

Someone muttered behind me.

I quietly peeked at the source of the sound and saw Mama Mia Lei smiling awkwardly.

Her face was saying 「Our clan head sure is stubborn.」

「Hmm... This is interesting.」

— A slurred voice that didn't fit the atmosphere echoed in the hall.

Zuro Tsun had spoken.

Donda Wu looked at him with hunter's eyes.

「However... they will still need some time to realize this plan. Our goal is to sell kiba meat instead of cooked food to the people in the city, so that will be tough... In that case, why don't take some time to observe the situation...?」

What a laughable comment.

After such a heated debate, he could only manage such a pitiful comment?

I couldn't feel the direction of his plans and will.

「How boring. To think that aside from the Fa house, the other houses would be tricked by the Fa house's flowery words.」

Diga Tsun who was beside Zuro Tsun said slowly.

「The Fou and Latzu houses... looks like we need to remember your names?」

The two house heads were still standing in the Ceremonial Hall and they glared at Diga Tsun with knife-like gazes.

A raging anger burned in my heart for the first time. Before I could explode, someone who had a lower boiling point than me erupted loudly:

「Hey, eldest son of the Tsun clan, what do you mean by that! When was there a rule in Forest's Edge that forbade associating with the Fa house!? You despicable man, you are the one who broke the rules in the first place, stop bearing a grudge!」

Dan Lutim roared loudly.

Thick veins appeared on his bald head, and raging flame shot out from his large eyes.

That's right... For a long time, many heads of smaller houses broke off their ties with the Fa house out of fear of the Tsun clan. And now, after two years, they are trying to change this situation.

This flame would never fade.

「L-Lutim house head, what do you mean by despicable? You have no reasons to accuse me of that, right?」

Diga Tsun was still smiling cheekily, but his face was starting to cramp up. Dan Lutim once threw a kiba over a hundred kilos at him, and he probably remembered that nightmare.

At this moment, I observed the faces of the other people— not just Zuro Tsun, even the heads of the Zaza and Jean houses looked displeased.

Zuro Tsun probably wanted less trouble, but the kins of the Tsun clan— despite our difference in opinions, had no intentions of defending Diga Tsun's despicable actions in the past.

They loathed Ai Fa who called herself a hunter as much as Donda Wu and the foreigner who claimed to be a member of the Fa house. They voiced their objections against us regarding the matter of excessive wealth on their own accord.

For them who believed in the chief clan, they had to be truly disgusted about the fact that Diga Tsun infiltrated the Fa house without permission on the night when Ai Fa lost her father.

Diga Tsun didn't understand that at all. He just kept abusing the authority of the chief clan and didn't consider the limits of other people's patience with him.

That was why— he would always be just a small fry.

Maybe we just need to wait for the day when Diga Tsun takes over Zuro Tsun's place.

Such a thought even appeared on my mind.

Once Diga Tsun becomes the clan head and tribal chief, Dom and Zaza would lose their confidence in the Tsun clan before long.

In that case, Donda Wu wouldn't need to resort to violence, there wouldn't be any need for underhanded means. The Tsun clan would destroy itself.

This might be very passive, but in a way, this is probably the most peaceful way to resolve this matter.

The current tribal chief Zuro Tsun looked at Dan Lutim, trying to calm him.

「... Head of the Lutim house, no need to be so loud... are you talking about what happened two years ago? There's no need to bring up the past, correct...?」

「If you want me to let that matter rest, then ask your useless son to shut up! Just hearing him speak disgusts me!」

Dan Lutim sat down heavily and crossed his legs. He then reached below with his right hand subconsciously.

I had quietly pushed my plate over, and even though Dan Lutim had been glaring at the Tsun clan this whole time, he still grabbed the spare rib flawlessly. Why was his perception so amazing?

Dan Lutim helped me voice out my mind, and this was just a small token of appreciation for him.

「... You don't need to bother with the names of the Fou and Latzu houses. You just need to etch the name of the Sudora house into your heart.」

A gloomy voice boomed out.

At the seat far away from the Tsun clan, a man who was in no way buffed stood up.

「The head of the Sudora house concurs with the head of the Fa house... Our houses need to live a more prosperous life.」

Another man some distance away got on his feet.

「... Gazu house also concurs with the Fa house. When they were talking about the tastiness of kiba meat earlier, I didn't understand what they were saying. After tasting this kiba meat, I changed my mind... There is a possibility that the people in the city might purchase this meat.」

Me too— people all around them wanted to express their agreement, but Zuro Tsun stopped them.

「My fellow house heads, please wait... I have no intention of judging the actions of the Fa house here... Like what I said earlier, it will be quite some time before we know if the Fa house can reach this goal... So let's take our time and observe in the meantime...」

「So that means the tribal chief has no objection with the Fa house's actions?」

Dali Sauti interrupted.

「But the kin houses of the Tsun clan, the Zaza and Dom houses sounded their objections. What are your views on that?」

「It goes without saying that the views of the Zaza and Dom houses make a lot of sense. I do think there are risks in bringing in excessive wealth and can't just ignore it... However, like what the Wu clan head said, giving value to the kiba meat is nigh impossible... Let's not get into a dispute over this trivial matter...」

Zuro Tsun shifted his sly gaze to the heads of the Zaza house and the others. They stood in place unhappily.

「House heads of Zaza, Jean, and Dom, kin houses of the Tsun clan... Can you let the matter rest on my account...? Until we determine whether the Fa house will bring prosperity or depravity, this way, we can keep the order in Forest's Edge in the usual manner...」

「... If that is the tribal chief's will.」

The head of the Zaza house and the others answered with restrained emotions and sat down.

After seeing that, Donda Wu also took his seat.

The representatives of Fou, Latzu, Sudora, and Gechi houses and the men from the Sauti clan all followed the tribal chief's instruction, bringing the atmosphere in the hall to a low.

「... Head of the Fa house and hearth caretaker, there should be a conclusion by the next house head meeting... Before that day, work hard towards your goal...」

Ai Fa nodded seriously.

「Asuta... What's going on...?」

Vena Wu grabbed the hem of my T-shirt.

「In the end, nothing got resolved...」

「Hmm～ who knows... from another perspective, everything has been settled.」

In a sense, the tribal chief Tsun clan was telling us 「Do what you want for now」.

Hence, if our actions didn't bring depravity to the denizens of Forest's Edge, the scary people from Zaza and Dom won't be able to pick on us.

Did the Tsun clan really let us have our way so easily?

This man Zuro Tsun... Is he a completely passive man?

I would rather he make a decision by polling for a majority.

Even though four houses including the Fou and Sudora concurred with us, there were 37 houses including the Tsun clan gathered here. Just how many house head agreed with Ai Fa and me? We only told everyone about this matter in order to confirm this.

But the Tsun clan's conclusion was— 「Discuss it next year」.

Before we could bring about our full power, they already made this conclusion.

This felt like a waste of our effort.

Donda Wu drank his fruit wine unhappily. Dan Lutim also chewed on the white bones absentmindedly. Before the house head conference, they had probably resolved themselves— if push were to come to shove, they were ready to resolve the issue with violence. I was glad that it didn't come to that, but they didn't have any place to vent their anger now.

Maybe the Tsun clan wants me to tend to their hearth for the sake of placating Mida Tsun... Is that possible?

Yamiel Tsun had a malicious air about her, but I couldn't feel anything from Zuro Tsun. He was slow, lazy and weak. He had a casual attitude and didn't care about the future if he could maintain the current peace.

Was this Zuro Tsun's true nature?

Is Yamiel Tsun the mastermind for the entire thing...? Even so, nothing much can be done once the house head conference is over. If Diga Tsun, Doddo Tsun, and the others obstructed our business, they would be going against the tribal chief's decision... In the end, what is their motive?

Zuro Tsun's face had a satisfied smile.

Diga Tsun seemed to be a little peeved.

Doddo Tsun was drinking quietly.

Did we— overestimate our enemy?

Beneath the halo of of being the tribal chief clan, was the Tsun clan just a group of small-time delinquents?

I had no way of knowing.

I didn't receive a proper answer— and finally, the dinner ended without any disturbance.

When the Tsun clan announced the end of the house head conference, they went back to their homes. The other participants had to sleep right in the Ceremonial Hall.

After surviving this night, we could return to our home sweet home.

... And of course, things couldn't end so simply.

I thought to myself after cleaning up post dinner.

Even if the Tsun clan were just a group of small-time delinquents, I couldn't just ignore them.

Once Diga Tsun inherits the position of tribal chief, the Tsun clan will head towards destruction. Despite this, I couldn't wait for 5 or 10 years. This wasn't just a problem for the Forest's Edge settlement.

The figures of Milano Mast, Uncle Dora and Yumi and what they said flashed across my mind. Even if they believed me and the people around me, they still couldn't stand the existence of the denizens of Forest's Edge— that was their common consensus. As long as the Tsun clan people forgot their honor as a part of Forest's Edge and continued their debauchery actions, we wouldn't be able to reach an understanding with the people of Genos.

And we met the members of the Tsun clan branch houses here. After seeing the dead eyes of those women, I couldn't just leave them be. Even if I made it through this night safely, there was still a mountain of problems.

Never mind, let's leave it to tomorrow...

I thought to myself quietly.

Back then, I thought I could leave these things for another day.

As for me who already knew how things would turn out—

That night, the real disaster in the Tsun clan village clawed its way at us.

Part 3

「Alright then, I will leave the rest to you, Darum.」

With those words, Donda Wu left the Ceremonial Hall.

He took all the women except Ai Fa with him.

The house heads were to sleep inside the Ceremonial Hall, but the women couldn't do that. So the Tsun clan gave an empty guest house to them.

He felt uneasy about letting the women go to the empty house by themselves, so Donda Wu intended to spend the night with them.

「... Asuta, Ai Fa, it's better for you to come with us.」

Until the very end, Mama Mia Lei was still worried about us. But we still decided to stay in the Ceremonial Hall.

Being in a room that could be barred was definitely safer. Diga Tsun, Doddo Tsun, and the others could still ignore the clan heads orders and act willfully. Since the kins of the Tsun clan were also staying in the Ceremonial Hall, the Tsun clan wouldn't dare act out of line in front of them, so it was safe here,

Donda Wu might be away, but the other warriors were still here.

There were thirteen men led by Dan Lutim and Rau Lei. The tens of neutral denizens who were also here couldn't be ignored either. Even if the Tsun clan was scheming something, they had to break through this meat wall to do anything conspicuous.

Besides, there was another reason why we chose to stay here, aside from the safety concern.

We needed to interact with the other houses.

The house heads who concurred with the Fa house and those who were curious all gathered around us, and kept asking us questions.

The questions were mainly asked by the house head of the Sauti clan Dali Sauti and their Elder Moga Sauti.

「The Sauti clan resides in the southern end of Forest's Edge. Our clan leads five kin houses, and you can think of us as the third largest clan behind the Tsun clan and Wu clan.」

Dali Sauti had an honest appearance but had his own style. His rectangular face wore a smile as he introduced himself.

「That's why we can't side with the Tsun or Wu clans easily. If we become a kin of either side, the power balance between the two clans will be disrupted... Furthermore, our village is closer to the Wu clan, so the Tsun clan is rather guarded towards us.」

「I see.」

「We have no intentions of bringing chaos to Forest's Edge, so we avoid being involved with the Tsun and Wu clans... Besides, we are all from the same Forest's Edge tribe and are saddened by the animosity between the Tsun and Wu clans. To be honest, I hope they can stop their feud and hunt kiba properly.」

The kins of the Wu clan were drinking wine and merrymaking some distance away. Dan Lutim's laughter could be heard constantly.

「Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa house, even if we ignore the power struggle between the Tsun and Wu clans, we can't ignore what the Fa house is doing. I hope you can explain the entire plan to me in detail.」

When Dali Sauti spoke, the house heads from Sauti's kin houses and house heads from the minor houses such as Fou and Latzu also gathered over.

Excluding the 7 kin houses led by the Wu clan, the 8 kin houses affiliated with the Tsun clan, and the Fa house, there were 21 other smaller houses. About eight-tenths of them gathered around us. Not everyone agreed with our opinions, but everyone wanted more precise information.

「I heard the kins of the Wu clan have learned the technique called bloodletting. Is everyone able to learn it...? Once we learn this technique, will all the kiba meat taste the same as dinner tonight?」

「Yes. It might fail occasionally but bloodletting isn't a difficult skill. The Wu clan and Lutim house learned it in just a few days. I don't have much experience with butchering kiba too... By the way, how was dinner?」

「It's very delicious. To be frank, my heart almost stopped from surprise.」



Dali Sauti scratched his head hard with his huge fingers.

「Leaving your business in the Post Station Town aside, we want to learn the bloodletting technique. But the Sauti clan is at the southern end of the settlement, and every house is some distance apart. Out of the Wu clan's kins, only the Mamu and Min houses are closer to us, but not within an easily traversable distance either. Can we still learn this technique?」

「Yes, I have already discussed this matter with Kaslan Lutim, the eldest son of the Lutim house. If the distance is too far, you just need to exchange men for a few days.」

「... Exchange men?」

「That's right. For example, the Lutim house and Sauti clan can each send out two men to each other's home. The men from the Sauti clan will learn the techniques at the Lutim house, while the Lutim house men will demonstrate the skills at the Sauti clan village. That way, the number of men at both houses would be the same. They could both perform their duties as usual while learning this technique.」

Dali Sauti widened his eyes upon hearing that, and the other house heads also started chatting among themselves.

「That is... a unique method... Although it's just for a few days, men who aren't kins have to live in each other's homes.」

「Correct. Unless the two houses have a relationship of trust, they can't afford such an extreme method... According to Kaslan Lutim, he thinks the denizens of Forest's Edge should reforge their trust in each other this way. After all, all houses are at a significant distance from each other, so aside from kins, the relationships between the houses will grow weaker over time.」

「... The eldest son of the Lutim house is the heir of the Lutim house head over there?」

「Yes, you are right.」

「How intriguing. The heir of that fiery house head actually thought of such a method. I really want to meet and chat with him.」

The air around Dali Sauti was a little similar to Kaslan Lutim.

Not just his bulky figure or honest aura, his matured style, logical and steady character— they were all similar to Kaslan Lutim's good points.

The two of them and Jiza Wu would be an amazing group, it seemed like there wasn't any place for Diga Tsun at all.

However, the opinions of these three were different.

But I thought that was a good thing.

Jiza Wu who prioritized order in Forest's Edge, Kaslan Lutim with his revolutionary ideas, the conservative but proactive Dali Sauti — I thought it was meaningful for these outstanding youths to exchange their views and figure out the correct path to take.

... I'm only thinking that way because I'm an outsider.

No matter what, I didn't have the resolve to be in charge. I hoped the denizens of Forest's Edge could use my ideas as a draft, and figure out the best route by themselves.

As a member of the Fa house, my failure was also Ai Fa's failure. Hence, I had to resolve myself to take the same path to the future as these capable youths. I had to muster my courage and sound out my views on which was the right path to take.

Besides—

Ai Fa might forge a path right beside this group of outstanding youths.

When I saw Ai Fa exchanging views directly with the heads of Zaza and Dom, such a thought appeared in my mind.

Ai Fa didn't just repeat Kaslan Lutim's view, she used her own words to engage with the heads of these two houses. After thinking about what Jiba Wu said and felt, she formed these words with her own opinion and feelings. I think that would be difficult for even Jiza Wu or Kaslan Lutim to achieve.

Yes, it's the same for the kins of the Tsun clan—

I slowly shifted my gaze over.

The head of house Zaza sat in the corner opposite Dan Lutim and drank fruit wine.

Mama Mia Lei thought they were even more stubborn than Donda Wu. Their views reminded me of Jiza Wu. They placed great importance on rules, customs and order, and were a conservative and inflexible group. They must detest Ai Fa and me.

The kins of the Tsun clan weren't the enemy. I saw their actions as appropriate for a Forest's Edge's denizen. Could I receive their acknowledgment and proceed with the first 「revolution」?

The only dangerous to me... are still the Tsun clan after all.

「Head of the Fa house.」

As I fell into deep thought, someone spoke to us again.

It was the head of the Fou house.

「The Fou house broke off ties with the Fa house because of the strained relationship between the Tsun clan and Fa house. As the house head, I judged that it might be dangerous to associate with the Fa house.」

Ai Fa quietly turned her head.

The head of the Fou house clenched his right hand and pushed it against the ground with his head low.

「I must admit the error in my judgment... Hence, I hope the Fa house can build a relationship with the Fou house again.」

「... Head of the Fou house, I don't think your decision was wrong. If the Fou house continued interacting with the Fa house, I don't know what the foolish sons of the Tsun clan could do.」

Ai Fa clumsily placed her hand on the shoulder of the Fou house head.

「You only made such a judgment to protect your family. There is no shame in that.」

「... But even though we broke off ties with you, you still sympathized with our situation and gifted us with hides. And we...」

「That's a misunderstanding.」

The next moment, Ai Fa showed an unhappy face.

「I already told the women from the Fou house. I didn't gift any hides to you... Leaving that aside, since the Fou house concurs with my proposal, then do start learning the techniques for bloodletting and butchering. Asuta, you will need plenty of kiba meat, right?」

「That's right. I have to make a large amount of jerky at the end of the blue month. Before that, I also need to provide meals to the inns. I will need a lot of kiba meat, and we can't keep relying on the Wu clan for that.」

The head of the Fou house looked at Ai Fa and me with sincere eyes.

A woman named Celice Von Fou once visited the Fa house, could she be the daughter-in-law or daughter of the Fou house? I thought and nodded.

「It will still be some time before we can sell kiba meat in the Post Station Town. But we are running short of kiba meat for the dishes I will be selling. If the Fou house can supply meat to us, we will trade for it with copper plates.」

I made this suggestion because of the Wu clan's advice.

If this goes on, the wealth would be gathered on the kins of the Wu clan. They were afraid of earning the ire of the minor houses, and hoped I could distribute the wealth more evenly.

The head of the Fou house lowered his head quietly once again.

At this moment, Dali Sauti who was listening yawned.

「We still have much to discuss, but it's getting late. They seem to be done with their drinks, so let's turn in.」

On a closer look, Dan Lutim had already walked to the center of the Ceremonial Hall and waved at us.

「Hey~ Asuta and Ai Fa, how long are you going to chat? Get over here!」

「Got it... Well then, let's discuss more tomorrow.」

「Alright, do explain to me on our way back. The kins of the Tsun clan are here too, and their gazes are annoying.」

The heads of the Sauti and Fou house also went to an open spot.

Ai Fa and I walked towards Dan Lutim.

「Over here! Just sleep at this spot!」

Dan Lutim patted the rug on the floor.

It was the center of the Ceremonial Hall, surrounded by the kins of the Wu clan.

「H-Here? I can't rest easy here.」

「But why? No matter what the Tsun clan is scheming, they can't lay their hands on you if you sleep here! When they step over my body, I will bite off their calf.」

Dan Lutim laughed heartily and lied down.

Darum Wu and Rau Lei also lied down.

This was a really sturdy wall. The Ceremonial Hall might be spacious, but after 70 men lied down, there wasn't any room to walk at all. No one could traverse this human wall and approach Ai Fa and me.

「Erm... let's sleep too?」

「Yes.」

Ai Fa sat down.

During the house head conference last year, did Ai Fa also sleep in the Ceremonial Hall while surrounded by men? The thought of that made my chest fluster.

Never mind, the other men won't act despicably like the Tsun clan. But Ai Fa is too defenseless.

I tried to keep my distance from Ai Fa in this cramped place and lied down.

However, my considerate action was futile. Ai Fa clung onto me tightly.

「Idiot, stay close to me.」

Ai Fa was sticking close to me.

Her fingers grabbed my chest tightly.

「A-Ai Fa, that's...」

「Shut up. I'm tired, we will talk tomorrow.」

Ai Fa rested her forehead heavily on my right shoulder.

「I'm really exhausted. I feel as if I had spoken a year's worth of words... My head hurts a little.」

「... Yes, you worked really hard today.」

I was worried about Darum Wu spying at us from somewhere and patted Ai Fa's head gently.

「Good night, Ai Fa. Rest well.」

「Hmmm...」

Ai Fa fell asleep easier than usual and started breathing steadily.

Even though Jiza Wu once said that he never thought that the Fa house head who didn't have any kin could decide the future of Forest's Edge, but this has nothing to do with the size of the houses.

I looked down at Ai Fa's defenseless and child-like face and pondered:

Anyway, Ai Fa can't shoulder such a heavy burden by herself. The future of Forest's Edge should be decided by the denizens of Forest's Edge. Ai Fa will definitely do her part as a denizen of Forest's Edge and as a house head of Forest's Edge...

Although the Tsun clan was the tribal chief clan, they didn't adhere to the rules of Forest's Edge.

If we dealt with those people, the future of Forest's Edge would become bright.

I'm starting to grasp the way to solve this issue. Simply put, we have to create a situation where the Dom and Zaza houses abandon the Tsun clan... If we combine the brute force of the Wu clan and my underhanded schemes, it's not difficult at all.

Even though the house head conference wasted my effort, I finally figured out a way to bring down the Tsun clan because of this conference. I shouldn't be too greedy.

Furthermore, we got acquainted with the Sauti clan and Fou house.

And now, the only problem we faced was Mida Tsun who was infatuated with my cooking.

I already thought of a plan for that. Tomorrow morning, I plan to invite Mida Tsun to the Wu clan village.

My plan was 『If you want to taste delicious meat, you should learn how to cook yourself』 .

In other words, 『If you are not willing to, give up on that idea』 .

I planned to propose this to Zuro Tsun with the Zaza and Dom kins present.

Mida Tsun was charmed with my cooking. If this went on, he might head into the Post Station Town by himself and create trouble. I planned to use the reason that Yamiel Tsun used to threaten me to propose a way to resolve this.

Even if they didn't send Mida Tsun himself, it's fine to send a man from the branch house. I hoped the Tsun clan could learn bloodletting and butchering.

If the Zaza house or Dom house were to object for letting a Tsun clan member head to the Wu clan village alone, and wanted to send someone to accompany, that would be even better.

When I suggested this after dinner, Donda Wu thought for a moment and said: 「Do what you want.」

He probably realized my true intentions. I thought we shouldn't feud with the Zaza and Dom, and the Wu clan should deepen their relationship with them instead. That would strip off the Tsun clan's influence. That was the scheme I thought up.

The Wu clan had no reason to be at odds with the kins of the Tsun clan. The Wu clan loathed the Tsun clan, while the Tsun clan kins believed in the Tsun clan. That was their only difference.

I never thought Mida Tsun's appetite would be the breakthrough point. How interesting.

Frankly speaking, this might be the last hope for the Tsun clan.

Mida Tsun was like the incarnation of gluttony, and if he led the way in hunting kiba, it could clear the heavy atmosphere lingering in the Tsun clan a little.

The men hunted kiba and the women cooked them. To eat this dish, the whole family had to work together and let their lives become more prosperous. I hoped they could find joy from this and brighten up their dead eyes again.

If my thinking is correct, those people are victims too. Once I reveal the true nature of the Tsun clan, we could strip away the authority of the tribal chief without spilling any blood.

It might take some time, but the Tsun clan had been depraved for decades now. We need to spend some effort to make them turn over a new leaf.

Never mind... Let's leave all that for tomorrow.

Finally, I looked at Ai Fa's adorable sleeping face before closing my eyes in this dim hall.

And then, an unknown amount of time passed.

An unknown feeling assaulted me, slowly rousing me from sleep.

... What happened?

I wasn't sure what was going on.

But things seemed to be awry.

The alarm in my mind rang.

I was still half-asleep when the unfamiliar feeling of 「dissonance」 crept into my brain.

What was that smell?

It was a strange odor with a hint of sweetness stimulating my nasal cavity. Just what was that?

I opened my heavy eyelids.

The world was shrouded in darkness.

The candles had already burned out.

My head was incredibly heavy.

So was my body.

I felt that I was in a dream, and only a part of me had woken.

Was this sleep paralysis?

No...

If this was sleep paralysis, then what was that smell?

This fragrance— was discomfoting.

My nose, throat, and lungs all strongly rejected this smell from infiltrating my body.

This was the reason for the feeling of dissonance and the alarm in my brain.

Is the Tsun clan... trying to kill everyone with poison gas...?

Such an incredible thought appeared in my mind.

The next instant, a strong sense of unease gripped me, and I tried to get up in a panic.

However, my body couldn't keep up with my mind.

I was anxious, but my body was as dull as a tortoise, and I could only move slowly.

I felt a warm weight on my chest.

It was Ai Fa.

Ai Fa's fingers.

I raised my right arm that was so dull that it didn't seem to be my own, and covered her fingers.

I slowly felt Ai Fa's body warmth.

Ai Fa was in deep slumber, but she still held my chest tightly.

I tried calling out her name.

But my throat was constricted and I couldn't speak properly.

At this moment, I realized how dry my mouth was.

It wasn't my imagination, and my eyes were hurting too.

My entire body felt dried up.

Is this— smoke...?

Did the candle flame lit the entire wooden building on fire?

No, in that case we would be engulfed in a sea of flames by now.

Besides, others would have noticed the abnormality before me. The ones gathered here were the elites of Forest's Edge after all.

No one got up...?

The Ceremonial Hall didn't have any windows, so it would be shrouded in darkness no matter how much time passes.

Even if I focused my eyes, the only thing before me was darkness.

However, the silence in the hall felt like a nightmare.

I couldn't even hear Dan Lutim's snore.

I could only sense the sweetness of that fragrance and the warmth of Ai Fa's fingers.

Anyway... I will be done for if I stay here...

I took out a towel from my shirt and covered my mouth and nose.

Just doing so made breathing much easier.

Also, the sweet fragrance was fainter when I sat up.

I didn't know what was that smell, but it was probably denser than air, something like LP gas⁶.

Alright...

I groped for Ai Fa's arm in the dark, and put my left arm around her back.

As I was trying to lift up Ai Fa's body—

I saw posse⁷ appearing.

「What? That brat is awake?」

The voice of a young man entered my ears. His voice was filled with malice.

His voice was deep and slow and irked me.

It was Diga Tsun.

「Why did he wake up? Tay Tsun, is the effect of the meremere leaves weaker against foreigners?」

「Hmm... I'm not sure.」

Tay Tsun answered emotionlessly.

At the same time, an orange light appeared behind me.

I turned back slowly.

Diga Tsun, Tay Tsun, and even Doddo Tsun were all here.

Diga Tsun was holding a lighted candle stand.

The other two didn't have anything in their hands.

But there were blades on their waists.

And— all of them had their mouths covered with a cloth.

「Never mind, even if this scrawny brat is awake, it won't matter. Let's hurry and carry them out.」

Diga Tsun instructed with a vicious smile, and the other two closed in on me.

There was no way I could resist.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liquefied_petroleum_gas

⁷ posse - a group of people who have come together for the same purpose

My arm strength was no match for the denizens of Forest's Edge in the first place, and my body was as heavy as lead.

「Stahp...」

I squeezed out with all my strength.

My voice was just like a whimper of a sickly old man.

Doddo Tsun dragged me along while Tay Tsun picked up Ai Fa. Ai Fa's limped fingers left my chest.

What was going on?

What just happened?

This felt like the deepest layer of a dream and lacked a sense of reality.

「Resistance is futile. Aside from you, everyone else is fast asleep.」

Diga Tsun laughed despicably and kicked the head of an unknown man lying on the side.

That man remained as still as a corpse.

「I burned meremere leaves just now, that's a herb I bought from a Semu shaman. If only I knew about such an interesting thing earlier.」

Herbs— a type of drug that causes drowsiness like sleeping pills?

Did he use that to put all the elites of Forest's Edge into a deep slumber?

「Anyone who keeps smelling the meremere leaves won't wake up even if their stomach is cut open. I spent five white copper plates just to buy this tiny amount... Never mind, since it can help me vent the grudge I had been bearing all this while, it's worth it.」

Diga Tsun's murky eyes shifted to Ai Fa.

I unconsciously raised my fist but was blocked by Doddo Tsun.

「Shut up and let's go. If we keep staying here, we will be rendered immobile too.」

And so, we were dragged away from the Ceremonial Hall.

They tried kicking the men beside them, and no one stirred at all.

This was bad.

This was the worst development.

These guys— just how vicious were they?

I thought they had lost their mind.

「 You actually did something so terrible... Do you think you can get away without any consequences? 」

Once I was out of the hall, it was easier to breathe and I could finally squeeze out some words.

But I still couldn't shout loudly.

「 You dare do such a thing in the presence of all the house heads in Forest's Edge...? Is the Tsun clan planning to antagonize all the houses...? 」

「 Shut up foreigner, don't make cocky speeches. 」

Doddo Tsun grabbed my arms while Diga Tsun leaned right before my nose with a creepy smile.

「 Besides, why would the Tsun clan be blamed? They should gift us with blessings instead. 」

「 Blessings...? 」

「 That's right. The eldest son and daughter are getting engaged at the same time, that's a cause for celebration. 」

A chill went down my spine.

A murky sensation I never felt before churned in my stomach.

「 Diga Tsun will take Ai Fa as his wife. Asuta of the Fa house will marry into the Tsun clan and be Yamiel Tsun's betrothed. Even though your house is on the verge of extinction, but you get to become a member of the Tsun clan, you should be overwhelmed with joy. 」



「Don't joke with me... You think we will agree to this? 」

Diga Tsun backed away in surprise.

He then laughed with an uglier expression:

「E-Even if you look at me like that, you can't get away now! If you refuse, we will push you both off a cliff! The other house heads will just think the Fa house abandoned the Forest's Edge and ran to the city! 」

「Diga, stop yelling. The Wu clan head is sleeping in an empty house, not the Ceremonial Hall. 」

When he heard Doddo Tsun's voice that was slurred because of drunkenness, Diga Tsun shirked his large body again.

「D-Don't scare me, Doddo. Tay Tsun, you brought the Wu clan people to the empty house at the most southern end, right? 」

「Yes, I did as you asked. 」

「Then there's no need to worry. That house is too far from the Ceremonial Hall, they won't hear you no matter how much you shout... Give it up. You have only two choices left. Either become Yamiel's husband or become fodder for the Munto at the bottom of the cliff. 」

Diga Tsun turned to Tay Tsun who was holding the unconscious and limped Ai Fa.

「Bring Ai Fa to my house. She won't wake up any time soon, so secure her hands and feet tightly. After I'm finished with Yamiel, I will go over right away. 」

「Yes. 」

Tay Tsun turned and left.

「Stop! 」

I screamed at his back.

「If you do anything to Ai Fa... I will never forgive you. 」

Diga Tsun stumbled back in fright again.

Despite the smile he was wearing, his face was turning pale.

Tay Tsun remained expressionless.

「... What do you mean by not forgiving us? You can't even stand by yourself now. 」

I felt a sharp pain in my head when Doddo Tsun spoke.

Doddo Tsun grabbed my body and tugged at my hair hard.

「Foreigner doesn't accept Yamiel's offer, alright? I have no intention of letting you become a member of the Tsun clan either. I will break your legs to stop you from running and push you into a munto's den.」

「... Try it if you can.」

There was a light shimmering in Doddo Tsun's eyes, like a famished dog. He was right in my face, but I still glared back at him.

Doddo Tsun's body quivered in surprise. As if he felt ashamed of his own weakness, he gritted his yellow teeth.

「Alright, I will do just that, let's see if you can show such a gaze when the time comes... Let's go Diga. Tay Tsun, you hurry up too.」

「Yes.」

Ai Fa's figure disappeared on the other end of the darkness.

I ground my teeth and felt as if they were going to burst. I kept inhaling strongly.

As I sucked in fresh air, strength slowly returned to my limbs.

I was still leaning on Doddo Tsun's arms, but I have recovered half my strength.

But— it wasn't enough.

I still couldn't shake them off and escape.

When I recover a little more, I will run away from them in one shot.

I will definitely— definitely not let them do anything despicable to Ai Fa.

They said that Donda Wu is in the house at the southernmost edge, right?

They kept spilling out critical information, that was why they would always be small fries.

While a flame was burning strongly in my belly— I became a prisoner of the cruel Tsun clan.

Chapter 3 - Night of Destruction

Part 1

「... Yamiel, I brought your husband here.」

Diga Tsun knocked on the door and called out quietly.

Yamiel's house was located on the outskirts of the Tsun clan village.

As the only source of light was the candle stand in Diga Tsun's hand, I couldn't tell where exactly I was. Judging the direction we headed from the Ceremonial Hall, this should be near the west.

Donda Wu was sleeping in the empty room to the south. I was getting further away from him. But I had yet to recover completely. Strength had returned to my limbs, but my sense of balance was still off. I couldn't walk straight, and Doddo Tsun was grabbing my collar and right arm anyway.

When I thought about Ai Fa, my heart felt like it would explode. But I shouldn't rush myself. If I were to fail here, we would be done for.

「Yes... Yes, that's true... No, things went smoothly...」

Diga Tsun whispered standing before the closed door.

He finally looked back at me.

「Alright, the groom will finally meet the bride... Brat, treat her with tender loving care, alright?」

Doddo Tsun dragged me to the door and made me stand there.

They wanted me to meet Yamiel Tsun by myself.

In that case, I might have the chance to launch a surprise attack.

Yamiel Tsun will definitely have a knife on her waist. If I snatch the knife and take her hostage—such a dangerous move wasn't my style, but I had to give it a shot.

As I braced myself, Diga Tsun pulled the door open, and Doddo Tsun shoved me in mercilessly.

I rolled into the house, and the door shut behind me.

The next moment—

I almost screamed.

「Asuta, I have been waiting for you... Pardon me, we might have been too rough...」

Yamiel Tsun's voice echoed in the dim room.

I could only lay prone on the cold wooden floor, unable to answer her.

I smelled blood.

The entire house was filled with the stench of blood.

This terrifying stench formed into physical pressure and stabbed my nasal cavity.

Smell was a type of particle.

We could sense smell when the scent particles in the air stimulated the membrane of our noses.

As the blood stench in this room was too strong, it felt like rotting blood was flowing into my nasal cavity directly. It felt revolting and uncomfortable.

An urge to vomit welled up in my throat.

「What's the matter...? Did we make you mad because we separated you from your beloved mistress in such a manner?」

As I was about to faint, these words pulled back my consciousness.

I didn't have time to lie around here. I had to rescue Ai Fa.

I slowly raised my head.

First, a bloody leg reflected in my eyes.

Then, my field of view drifted through a midriff covered in blood, belly stained in red, arms dyed in fresh blood, breasts dripping in blood, a neck splattered with blood and finally stopped at a bloody face.

Yamiel Tsun was standing there naked with blood all over her.

「You...」

A hoarse voice came from my throat.

「What are you doing...?」

「Fufu... What am I doing...? I'm savoring the grace of the forest...」

Blood-stained hair covered Yamiel Tsun's face as she laughed out loud.

Her bloodied face was all smiles.

A glint was shining in her usually calm dark blue eyes.

「We need more strength. Just kiba meat isn't enough... So I bathed my entire body in the power of the forest...」

「Is this kiba blood...?」

My eyes were getting used to the dim room.

The room was illuminated with a faint candlelight.

Thanks to that I even saw something I didn't want to see.

The dark figure of an animal was hanging behind Yamiel Tsun.

It was a giant carcass of a kiba, which was strung up onto beam on the ceiling with chains.

That was probably the kiba Mida Tsun hunted in the afternoon.

「Our ancestors injected the power of the forest into their body through this method. That is how our hunters obtained strength that exceeds that of the ferocious kiba.」

At this moment, I heard a creepy dripping sound.

Yamiel Tsun took a step towards me.

The kiba blood continued to drip onto the floor.

She probably slit the throat of the kiba to let the blood splatter down onto her.

In the dim room lit by an orange light there was a naked woman covered in dark red blood— as I was horrified by this nightmarish scene, I shouted:

「What are you doing!? Forest's Edge forbids the consumption of raw meat, correct? In that case, the fresh blood of kiba is equally dangerous! Kiba blood that has not been heated might be harmful to the body!」

「It's fine... This ritual is necessary...」

「I have never heard of such a ritual! This ritual is dangerous, and even if it existed in the past, it must be taboo now! Wash that blood away right now!」

Yamiel Tsun looked at me with dazed eyes.

「Do you wish for the demise of the Tsun clan too? The Tsun clan needs strength... so, give your strength to us...」

Drip, drip, Yamiel Tsun kept walking my way.

A sensation I couldn't tell whether it was anger or fear made me quiver. But even so, I stood up and faced off against Yamiel Tsun.

「I don't understand what you are saying! Why is the Tsun clan the only one that became like this? All other denizens of Forest's Edge live with pride and righteousness— so why is the chief Tsun clan the only one that is so depraved!?」

「This... must be because the Tsun clan had taken in all the poison...」

Yamiel Tsun's eyes looked as if she had lost her mind and shimmered with an unfamiliar light.

「As long as the Tsun clan keeps falling into the abyss, the clueless denizens of Forest's Edge can live in a pure and bright way... The Tsun clan has been protecting the denizens of Forest's Edge this way all this time...」

「I don't know about that! Can't you live like the others with your heads held high!?」

「... That is impossible.」

A strange light flashed in Yamiel Tsun's eyes once more.

「We can't turn back now... The day of destruction draws near... We can't hide things from our kins any longer...」

「Hide things from your kins?」

「You already know, right...? After tending to the Tsun clan's hearth, didn't you realize? Are you that dull-witted...?」

I couldn't answer right away.

So— things were really like that?

Was my deduction true?

「Never mind... We are facing our demise, so I want to grasp onto the last bit of hope... As long as you are here, the Tsun clan can be saved. You can earn many copper plates in one day. If you become a part of the Tsun clan, the Tsun clan will not head towards destruction...」

「That's... too weird! Your people just need to hunt kiba properly to live a normal life, you don't need me! The other denizens of Forest's Edge also live this way, so you can do the same!」

「... If I were the head of the Tsun clan, I might choose that path...」

The corners of Yamiel Tsun's mouth were upturned.

But she looked as if she was about to cry.

The dark red blood was just like her tears.

「But that is impossible... The previous clan head Zattsu was a foolish man, and the current house head is more stupid... His heir Diga is even more hopeless than them... The Tsun clan is done for...」

「But—」

「Only you can save the Tsun clan.」

Yamiel Tsun walked to my side.

The unbearable blood stench and her smile that was twisted from despair chilled my heart.

「Will you marry into the clan as my husband and save the Tsun clan...? If you aren't willing, let us die together...」

Blood-stained fingers reached for me slowly.

When the fingertips touched my face, I shook my head.

「I refuse. I decline both choices. If you wish for salvation, I'm willing to lend a hand as a member of the Fa house. I have no intention of becoming a member of the Tsun clan.」

「... I see...」

Yamiel Tsun's wet fingers brushed across my body and pressed against the door.

「... So you won't save us...」

「No, like I said, if you want to be saved, you need to do so by proper means—」

「It's such a pity.」

Yamiel Tsun pulled the door open.

At the same time, someone grabbed my collar and pulled me to the ground.

「... It's really a pity...」

Yamiel Tsun's figure was hidden on the other side of the door.

When I last saw her bloodied face, she looked like a little girl sobbing quietly.

「I have been waiting for this. So you are doing as I wished and deciding to become Munto food?」

Doddo Tsun's voice was hoarse from glee.

I stood up immediately.

However, I felt dizzy and supported myself by holding on to the door.

The effects of meremere leaves were still lingering in my body.

「Since you chose this path, the female hunter from the Fa house can't escape either. When Diga is done with her, we will push the both of you to the bottom of the valley.」

I looked around in surprise.

The one holding the candle stand beside Doddo Tsun wasn't Diga Tsun but Tay Tsun.

「... Where is Diga Tsun!」

I roared with rage on reflex.

Doddo Tsun stoned face twisted, and he laughed with mockery.

「He is enjoying himself right now. That woman has feral eyes, I don't understand what's so good about her.」

「Why you...」

My vision became dyed in red.

My body felt as if it was going to explode.

「... Just how rotten are you going to get...」

These words came out of my mouth unconsciously.

Doddo Tsun's smile was gone, and he reached for the saber on his waist.

「What's with that gaze... You want me to cut you down right here?」

「Try me if you dare!」

My hand left the door.

My heart pumped intensely in my chest.

The blood vessels in my head were on the verge of bursting.

This was the first time I hated someone so much.

If Diga Tsun really did something shameless to Ai Fa, I wouldn't let the law hold me back.

「Get lost... Don't block my way!」

Doddo Tsun staggered back.

He grabbed the handle of the saber and pulled it out of its scabbard.

The next instant, a dark figure came out from the shadows.

I didn't know what was happening.

Doddo Tsun was suddenly sent flying for several meters and hit the ground. Tay Tsun lifted his sheathed saber.

「Stop it. I won't hold back, you know?」

A familiar voice entered my ears.

A figure shorter than me was holding a stick and facing off against Tay Tsun.

「I don't want to kill if I can help it. My Dad already cautioned me about that.」

「L-Ludo Wu!？」

I could definitely recognize him, even if it was just his back.

The youth who had yellowish-brown hair and was holding a krilee stick shrugged a little.

「Sorry Asuta, my Dad told me that I can't interfere unless the Tsun clan people violate a taboo that can't be excused. I could finally come here thanks to that retard drawing his blade.」

「Why... Why are you here?」

「My Dad ordered me to make a trip here. He wanted me to stay up all night and watch the Tsun clan village. I was dying of boredom since everything has been so peaceful.」

「Ludo Wu, let's talk later.」

Another figure appeared behind Tay Tsun.

It was a youth with dark brown hair and was as small as Ludo Wu in stature and slenderly build — he was the head of a Wu clan branch house, Shin Wu.

「Men from the Tsun clan, stop your futile resistance. You can't defeat us alone.」

Shin Wu was also holding a stick.

That was probably a krilee stick. Both of them had blades tied to their waist, but they showed no intention of drawing them.

「Tay... Tay Tsun, what are you waiting for!? Hurry up and kill them!」

Doddo Tsun laid prone to the ground and shouted hysterically.

Tay Tsun looked at him with emotionless eyes.

「Doddo Tsun, are you giving an order as a member of the Tsun clan main house?」

「Shut up! Kill them!」

Tay Tsun quietly placed the candle stand by his feet.

Seeing him reach for his saber, Ludo Wu said:

「Hey, stop it. You look strong, so even if we fight you two on one, I'm not confident I can capture you alive.」

「... In that case, kill me.」

Tay Tsun's eyes were murky as usual. He pointed the tip of his blade at Ludo Wu's throat.

「Tch, Dad is going to be mad at me.」

Ludo Wu muttered casually, then tossed his krilee stick aside.

He untied the machete on his waist.

It was the huge machete he bought in the Post Station Town.

He rested the sheathed machete on his right arm.

「You fools... I will turn you all into Munto fodder!」

Doddo Tsun yelled and rushed at Ludo Wu with his blade held high.

Tay Tsun slashed his saber at the same time.

This is bad— I took a step forward unconsciously.

And rammed Doddo Tsun's back with my shoulder using all of my might.

This attack should have been trivial to a normal man from Forest's Edge.

But Doddo Tsun was drunk right now.

And he still hadn't recovered from Ludo Wu's attack earlier.

In short, my ramming caused Doddo Tsun to lose his balance. We got entangled and fell to the ground.

「Damn it!」

Doddo Tsun attempted to get up.

I bit Doddo Tsun's right arm that was holding the saber with all my might.

「Hyaahh!」

He screamed and kicked my belly.



I fell backward because of his kick.

「Damn it! I'm going to kill you! You are dead meat, foreign boy!」

Doddo Tsun held his bloodied right arm and jumped up.

At this moment, a large figure quietly emerged behind him.

「What are you doing, brat...!?」

A deep voice that was trembling with rage entered our ears.

Doddo Tsun turned his head in surprise.

A large palm slapped his face.

And the battle was over.

Doddo Tsun flew further than earlier, rolled on the ground until crashing into the wall of Yamiel Tsun's house and then stopped.

「Asuta! Are you alright!?」

Despite the huge size of the figure, it grabbed me with nimble hands.

The candle stand which served as a source of light was quite some distance from us, but I couldn't be wrong about the unique features of the dark figure before me. He helped me up agilely and looked so anxious that he was on the verge of tears. Who else could he be? It has to be Dan Lutim.

「Dan Lutim... Why are you in a place like this...?」

I squeezed these words out as I nursed my aching abdomen, and Dan Lutim finally smiled in relief.

「That's my line! When I heard a commotion happening here, I rushed over and found you in a pinch... Asuta, don't make me so worried! What are you doing in a place like this?」

「No... not now. Ludo Wu and Shin Wu are...」

「Hmm?」

Dan Lutim surveyed the surroundings with an expression of a raging demon god.

「There's another fool here, huh! Man of the Tsun clan, if you are going to draw your blade against the Wu clan, then face me!」

The three of them had an intense battle in this short period of time. Ludo Wu and Tay Tsun were both bleeding from the head, while Shin Wu's krilee stick was broken. He placed a hand on his chest and knelt on the ground.

「...Lutim house head, he didn't order me to kill you.」

Tay Tsun laid down the saber in his hand.

His dead eyes looked Ludo Wu without any strength in them.

「What do you mean? What a weird old man.」

Ludo Wu wiped away the blood on his face with the back of his hand and retreated.

「Dan Lutim, help me out here! If this continues, I will have to draw my blade!」

「Ohh?」

Dan Lutim made a strange noise, then dragged me towards Ludo Wu.

After handing me over to Ludo Wu, he stood before Tay Tsun.

「What are you talking about? If you want to sheath your blade, then do it.」

「A member of the Tsun clan main house ordered me to defeat these two young ones. I'm not doing this out of my own will.」

「I see.」

Dan Lutim answered and kicked Tay Tsun's stomach at the same time.

Tay Tsun let go of the blade in his hand and quietly collapsed onto the ground.

「What a queer dude. Isn't there anyone normal in the Tsun clan?」

As Dan Lutim was mumbling with an annoyed face, I grabbed Ludo Wu.

「Ludo Wu! Where is Ai Fa!? Did anyone follow her!?」

「Ehh? No, only me and Shin Wu came to keep an eye on the Tsun clan. We couldn't watch over of Ai Fa.」

「How could you do that!? Why!?」

「Your situation looked more precarious. I couldn't draw my blade, so I wasn't able to deal with two people at the same time.」

Ludo Wu pouted unhappily.

「I see. Sorry. Thank you for saving me... Please help me find Ai Fa now!」

At this moment, Dan Lutim interjected:

「What are you arguing about? What happened to Ai Fa?」

「Diga Tsun brought Ai Fa back home! If we don't hurry and find her, he will...」

Compared to being kicked in the stomach, I felt a greater pain in my chest.

I was too worked up right now, as if I was going to stop breathing.

Ludo Wu leaned near my face from the side.

「Ai Fa will be fine, right? She seemed to be unconscious, but the eldest son of the Tsun clan won't be able to lay a finger on her.」

「No, those people from the Tsun clan burned a strange herb, which sent the people in the Ceremonial Hall into a deep slumber. If the effect of the herb still lingers, Ai Fa will be in great danger!」

I felt that explaining this was also a waste of time.

Ludo Wu showed a surprised expression once again.

「I was wondering why they were holding a candle stand and acting so suspiciously. So that's why... But you and Dan Lutim are both moving freely now, right? So Ai Fa will be fine too.」

「Well, I smelled something strange when I was sleeping, so I crawled out of the Ceremonial Hall in a hurry. I stepped on many people, but none of them woke up.」

Dan Lutim's keen sense of smell helped him escape.

That was really lucky— but enough about that, the most important thing right now is rescuing Ai Fa.

「Please help me. Ai Fa must be somewhere in this village!」

「Okay, let's break down the doors of all the houses...」

At this moment, a light shone in Dan Lutim's eyes.

「Who's there!?」

「Eek!」

A frail scream came from afar.

「Hold it right there! I won't let you get away!」

Dan Lutim's figure disappeared without a trace.

「Woooahh—!」

He sprinted off in a direction opposite of Yamiel Tsun's house.

Dan Lutim was extremely fast, and despite weighing over a hundred kg, his movements were just like an athlete sprinter.

His dependable and amusing figure disappeared into the darkness at the other end, and I heard a scream.

「Let me go! I didn't do anything! I just came to see what's all this ruckus!」

It was a sharp hysterical scream of a girl.

She was the youngest daughter of the Tsun clan, Zwei Tsun.

Dan Lutim carried her petite body under his armpit and appeared before us.

「Zwei Tsun! Where is Diga Tsun's house!?!」

Zwei Tsun glared at me unhappily.

She then swept her gaze towards the motionless Doddō Tsun and Tay Tsun who were sitting weakly in a heap.

「I don't know what's going on... But looks like the Tsun clan is done for.」

「Hey, Zwei Tsun——」

「Don't stare at me with such scary eyes. I'm not involved with this at all.」

Zwei Tsun pursed her lower lips.

「Diga Tsun's house is on the other side of the main house, two houses away.」

「Okay! Asuta, let's go!」

Dan Lutim charged with Zwei Tsun still in his arm.

I picked up the candle stand by my feet and ran after them.

「Shin Wu! Tie these two up! And don't let the woman in that house get away!」

Ludo Wu ran beside me.

「Asuta, it will be fine. Ai Fa is a hunter. The Tsun clan are just retards who had forgotten the glory of hunters, she will never lose to them.」

Ludo Wu shouted beside me. How nice would it be if his words were true.

Ai Fa... Please be okay...!

This was probably the first time in my life that I felt so close to despair.

Even when I jumped into the raging sea of flames in my original world, I didn't feel this way.

My heart hurt terribly.

My knees felt like they were going to crack.

Ai, Fa—

Be it gods or demons, please protect Ai Fa.

This was a once in a lifetime request.

Even if it cost me my life.

If I lose Ai Fa, I wouldn't be able to live on.

I couldn't bear Ai Fa experiencing something so terrible.

「... It's that house over there.」

A wooden house that looked no different from the others appeared in the darkness.

Dan Lutim who was leading the run kicked the door, assisted by his momentum.

With a low 「Thud!」 sound, the door was flattened.

「Hmmp! It's really sturdy!」

Dan Lutim tossed Zwei Tsun aside and lifted his leg again.

His next strike sent the door flying along with its bar.

「Ai Fa!」

I squeezed past Dan Lutim's huge body and stepped into the room.

In front of me was an empty hall.

There wasn't anyone here.

However, a half-opened door deeper in had faint lights shining out.

「Hey! Don't just barge in like that!」

When I heard Ludo Wu's voice behind me, I had already charged across the hall.

I opened that half-opened door and stepped in—

Then fell onto the floor.

「Uwah!」

Something soft was lying at the entrance.

I tripped on that thing and fell onto the floor.

The candle stand in my hand dropped too and the rug on the floor started to burn.

「... Ai Fa!」

Ai Fa was in the room.

Her limbs were tied.

She was curled up like a baby and lying on a bedding in the room.

Ai Fa laid there weakly.

「Ai Fa...」

I reached for her shoulder.

The next instant, her rope-bound hands grabbed my chest tightly.

Emotional fire burst out from her blue eyes and then calmed down.

「Asuta... You are safe...」

「Uwah!」

She then tugged my chest hard, pulling me towards her. I fell on top of her.

Her smooth cheeks ground against my face.

「I was so worried... It's great that you are safe...」

「That's my line...」

I sighed in relief with all of my strength.

I was saved.

I didn't lose Ai Fa.

I didn't need to hate the fate of this world.

I didn't need to curse my own carelessness.

I wouldn't lose my sense of reason.

After offering my gratitude to all the gods in this world, I held Ai Fa tightly.

「I told you she will be fine.」

Ludo Wu's cocky voice came from behind.

「This is the eldest son of the Tsun clan, right? He seemed to have lost his consciousness comfortably.」

When I pulled Ai Fa's body up from the bedding, I stole a glance to the floor near door.

The thing that tripped me just now was Diga Tsun's body.

The unforgivable eldest son of the Tsun clan laid sprawled at the entrance.

「Ai Fa, was it you who did this? Your limbs were tied, and you still managed to fend him off?」

「... No matter how restricted my body was, I won't lose to the Tsun clan... After elbowing his face, I kicked him...」

Ai Fa said with a whimsical voice, then started grinding my forehead against her cheeks.

That made me feel embarrassed. I had recovered my senses a little, and my nose perceived a familiar fragrance.

It was the scent of fruit wine.

And it obviously came from Ai Fa.

「Hey, Ai Fa, don't move, okay?」

Ludo Wu pulled out the knife on his waist and cut the bounds on Ai Fa's limbs.

The next instant, Ai Fa was free, and she put her arms around my neck.

「That's wonderful... Asuta, you are safe...」

「Y-Yes, it's wonderful... Ai Fa, are you alright? You still look sluggish.」

Ludo Wu and Dan Lutim who were blocking the entrance looked at us with a puzzled expression. Ai Fa didn't notice their gaze as she moved her head away from my face and asked:

「What do you mean?」

Her eyes looked as sleepy as Vena Wu's.

Her slightly pouting pink lips looked extremely sexy.

And then— I noticed that her cheeks were a little red.



「... Were you forced to drink wine?」

「Hmm.....? Now that you mentioned it... some fluid flowed into my mouth when I was sleeping... and woke me...」

「I see. So you defeated him right after getting up?」

When Ai Fa was in deep slumber, someone attempted to wake her by making her drink wine.

In the end, Diga Tsun was knocked out by Ai Fa. This was an ending that befitted this dimwitted man — As I was thinking, Ai Fa shook her head.

「No... the eldest son of the Tsun clan appeared later... I woke up after I drank something... and was confused as to why my limbs were bound... or why I was here... Then that retard showed up.」

Ai Fa clung to my neck again.

「Anyway, it's great that you are fine... Asuta, didn't I tell you not to leave me...?」

「Oh right, sorry. But it's great that both of us are safe.」

Ai Fa's unusual body contact made my heart flutter; and I quickly scanned surroundings around me.

There wasn't any fruit wine bottle on the floor.

Did a third party other than Diga Tsun help Ai Fa from her precarious situation?

Could it be Kamyua Yost?

That man who loved pretending to be retard appeared in my mind first.

But— that didn't feel right.

Would that man do something so half-hearted?

If he lent Ai Fa his aid, he would have undone her bounds too. Fortunately, Ai Fa's hands were bounded in front of her, so she could fend off Diga Tsun. The one who saved Ai Fa left without waiting for Ai Fa to wake up. He probably didn't want to show his face and decided to remain as a bystander; hence this gamble-like method of saving her was used.

In that case, could it be.....

The one who saved her was— Tay Tsun?

Tay Tsun was the one who tied up Ai Fa in the first place.

He intentionally bonded her arms in front of her, allowing her greater freedom of movement.

That man whose eyes were devoid of strength claimed that he couldn't go against the main house, but he laid down his arms without hesitation before Dan Lutim.

Was it because he wanted to give Ai Fa a chance?

「...Asuta, we should go now.」

Dan Lutim called out to me as he stroked his brown beard.

「Go...? Go where?」

「To find Donda Wu, of course... Or rather, our future tribal chief.」

Dan Lutim showed a cheery smile.

「The Tsun clan violated many taboos this night. No matter how much the tribal chief apologizes, it won't be enough for us to forgive the crimes committed by these retards. This might be the end of the Tsun clan.」

「... That's true.」

Tsun clan staked everything in this gamble and lost everything.

But why... why did they pick this day to commit such a foolish act?

Why did they risk such a barbaric move for the sake of making Ai Fa and me a part of a Tsun clan?

Why would they execute such a rash and full of holes scheme?

Who was the mastermind behind this?

Did Zuro Tsun issue the orders in secret?

Did Diga Tsun and the others lose their self-control?

There were mountains of questions.

However, we had to end all this now.

「... Let's go.」

As I was about to stand—

Ai Fa wouldn't let me go.

「Hey, Ai Fa, we are going now. Can you walk?」

「Hmm.....? Yes, I can, but you are not permitted to leave me.」

Her soft arms hugged my body even tighter.

「No, I'm not leaving you. We are going to settle things with Tsun clan now, right?」

「Hmm...?」

Ai Fa ground my face with her cheeks again.

Ludo Wu and Dan Lutim stared at us dumbfounded.

「No, ermm, it's not like that. She smelled that strange herb and drank some fruit wine, so she is a little tipsy.」

Even as I tried to explain, their expressions remained unchanged.

Dan Lutim turned to Ludo Wu.

「... Ludo Wu, I have a suggestion.」

「Huh? Why so sudden?」

「The Fa house isn't a kin of the Wu clan, but they are friends of the Lutim house. When Asuta and Ai Fa holds their wedding, can we borrow the plaza in the Wu clan and let the Wu clan's kins celebrate with them?」

「Ah~ that should be fine. We can let anyone who wants to celebrate gather at the plaza.」

「No, I already said, that's not it!」

The way we were right now made this rebuttal unconvincing at all, but that was the only thing I could shout.

I bowed my head and groaned as I shouted.

Would things really be settled like this?

This was all too sudden.

The plan and scheme I prepared were all for naught. Would we watch the Tsun clan head towards destruction without coming to an understanding with them?

Several ominous voices echoed in my mind.

Yamiel Tsun told me: 「... If you aren't willing, let us die together...」

Tay Tsun said: 「... In that case, kill me.」

Could it be—

Some of the Tsun clan members wish strongly for the Tsun clan's demise?

Part 2

「Wake up, my brethren!」

Dan Lutim shouted spiritedly and splashed water inside the Ceremonial Hall.

A few of the men woke up and yelled:

「What are you doing!? Have you gone mad!?」

One of them stood up with a demon-like expression.

His palms were sweaty, knees weak, arms were heavy. His legs buckled like Mom's spaghetti.

「Hmm? What's going on... there's no strength in my limbs...?」

「Isn't that right? That's why I woke you by splashing water!」

Dan Lutim laughed heartily.

As he kept splashing the water, shouts and screams echoed out in the Ceremonial Hall. Donda Wu let the women do the same barbaric act at the entrance to the Ceremonial Hall.

Some time had passed since Diga Tsun kidnapped me and Ai Fa. The effects of the meremere leaves were fading, and everyone regained consciousness faster than I expected, and the men from the various houses crawled out from the Ceremonial Hall.

「Those who are awake leave the Ceremonial Hall quickly! There is smoke from a poisonous foreign herb lingering here! Those who have the strength help those who had not awakened!」

Ai Fa and I stayed quietly beside the joyous Dan Lutim.

Ai Fa's eyes had recovered eighty percent of her reason, but her steps were still unsteady, so I was supporting her right now.

「Head of the Lutim house! What are you trying to do!」

A man stumbled out of the Ceremonial Hall and grabbed Dan Lutim.

It was the head of the Zaza house.

「I'm not trying to do anything! You can ask your esteemed Tsun clan members why we are doing this!」

Dan Lutim's face showed a fearless smile as he pointed to his feet.

Diga Tsun sat cross-legged on the ground unhappily, his arms tied behind his back with ropes.

「They used a strange foreign herb to make us fall into deep slumber and attempted to harm the Fa house members! Since you are a kin of the Tsun clan, then share this shame with them!」

「What did you say...? Eldest son of the Tsun clan, is what he said true?」

The head of the Zaza house closed in on Diga Tsun, his feral eyes burning brightly.

Diga Tsun shoulders quivered in fright, and he averted his head silently.

「We are going to question the tribal chief Zuro Tsun and will confirm if the entire Tsun clan condones such behavior! My fellow house heads, follow me and demand an answer from him!」

The shoulders of the Zaza house head trembled.

At this moment, Rau Lei whose blonde hair was all wet appeared.

「Dan Lutim! What's with the commotion? What happened to the Tsun clan?」

「Oh, it's the head of the Lei house. The Tsun clan is finally showing their true nature! Depending on the situation, we might need to resort to force, so snap out of it!」

Dan Lutim handed the saber by his feet to Rau Lei.

We had taken Diga Tsun's saber.

The Tsun clan was still safekeeping all the men's blades.

「Idiots! Are you going to draw your blade against the chief clan!?」

The head of the Zaza house roared immediately.

Dan Lutim turned to him nonchalantly.

「Anyone who breaks the rules of Forest's Edge must be punished. It's the same even for the chief clan. If not, we can't maintain the order at Forest's Edge... Head of the Zaza house, it's time for you to wake up.」

「But... But why does the Tsun clan want to harm the Fa house!? There's no reason for the Tsun clan to do that!」

「We are going there right now to demand an answer. Save your outburst for after you hear the chief clan's explanation.」

As they spoke, the people slumbering in the Ceremonial Hall had more or less escaped.

Half of them were still half-asleep, while the other half who was clear headed heard Dan Lutim's words— and all of them had the eyes of hunters burning with rage.

「... Looks like everyone is here.」

Donda Wu walked towards us from the other end of the darkness.

His eyes were set ablaze like a wild beast.

「You are here, Donda Wu. What happened to the second son of the Tsun clan and the others? 」

「I sent Ludo to take care of them. Everyone, gather at the door of the main house. 」

「I see. Let's go. 」

Dan Lutim grabbed Diga Tsun's collar with his thick fingers.

「Damn it! Unhand me! You think you can get away with doing such a thing to the chief clan!? Zaza, Jean, what are you standing there for! Hurry up and get rid of these insolent fools! 」

「Shut up, eldest son of the Tsun clan! Who do you think are the most furious ones here? 」

Dan Lutim asked in a surprised tone:

「You don't even know this? You are the first one that your kins wants to strangle right now. 」

「Yiip... 」

Diga Tsun shrunk into a ball.

He finally noticed the eyes of the Zaza and Jean house heads.

Of everyone present, they were the most enraged.

As things were finally coming to an end, Donda Wu and Dan Lutim were all hyped up and didn't get mad at all.

The ones who were angry about the chief clan's reputation being tarnished had to be the Tsun clan's kins.

「Alright... Stand up, fellow house heads. The head of the Tsun clan had trampled over the bonds and trust within Forest's Edge. I, the head of the Wu clan Donda Wu, will now head over to the Tsun clan to question his true intentions! Everyone, judge with your own eyes whether the Tsun clan is qualified to be our tribal chief! 」

Donda Wu's roar shook the dark night.

The men squirming on the ground finally stood up wobbling.

「... Ai Fa, can you walk? 」

When she heard say that, Ai Fa pouted defiantly:

「I can barely manage... Asuta, you and Dan Lutim had already recovered, so why am I the only one in such a terrible state? 」

Ai Fa could stand on her own now, but she was still leaning weakly on my shoulder.

「Someone must have force-fed you fruit wine. The alcohol was effective in making you regain consciousness, but sedatives are usually not suitable to be taken together with alcohol.」

「Damn, this is unsightly.」

Ai Fa ground her head on my shoulders firmly, as if she was venting out on me.

At this moment, a tall figure appeared before us.

It was Darum Wu.

He hadn't recovered completely, and the second son of the Lutim house was lending him a shoulder.

「What's the matter? Here to mock me...? You don't look much better than me today?」

Ai Fa seemed very unhappy, it was rare to see her saying something so combative.

Darum Wu didn't speak a word, a scary emotion was burning in his eyes.

Was I mistaken? The large scar on the right side of his face seemed to stand out more than usual, putting his rage and frustration on full display.

「I heard that those who drank plenty of fruit wine will recover slower. I didn't drink a sip, so I jumped up immediately when the water was splashed on me.」

The second son of house Lutim mediated for them. He resembled Kaslan Lutim a lot, but he had a broader build and looked more similar to his father.

「Let's go. I don't know what kind of ending awaits us. But after this night, there will be a drastic change to the future of the Tsun clan.」

We headed for the Tsun clan together.

Donda Wu led the way, followed by Dan Lutim who was dragging Diga Tsun. Rau Lei and the other kins of the Wu clan walked on their flanks.

The heads of the Dom and Zaza houses were one step behind them, and the people with them were probably the kins of the Tsun clan.

The heads of the minor houses led by Sauti all followed along too.

Flames of rage and distrust burned in their eyes.

Did the Tsun clan really trample over the bonds of Forest's Edge?

Why did they act so brazenly?

Or was this all an elaborate lie woven by the Fa house and the Wu clan?

Everyone bore different thoughts.

And all of them were steaming mad.

The Tsun clan used a dubious foreign herb to make everyone fall into deep slumber. Hunters would not stand such humiliation.

Most importantly, they couldn't permit the Tsun clan to confine the innocent and harm their lives.

「Hi Dad, you sure are slow.」

Ludo Wu and Shin Wu were already waiting in front of the Tsun main house.

The two of them and the bound Doddo Tsun and Tay Tsun appeared before us.

And also—Yamiel Tsun.

Yamiel Tsun was in a Forest's Edge attire she was wearing in the afternoon. Her hair was completely wet.

She had probably washed her body. Even from a distance, I could smell a faint rusty scent.

Yamiel Tsun wasn't tied up, but Mama Mia Lei and the women from the Wu clan and Lutim house surrounded her tightly.

She didn't show any expression on her face.

「Heads of the various houses, listen up!」

Donda Wu roared once again.

「Before the house head conference's commencement, the head of the Tsun clan Zuro Tsun requested for the Fa house to caretake their hearth! As their request was too suspicious, I sent my son to watch the Tsun clan village! And the Tsun clan really committed an unforgivable crime. And so, no one can question my actions! Even if anyone does, I won't pay it any heed!」

Donda Wu's eyes burned brighter than anyone else, and he surveyed his tribemates standing in the dark.

「Tonight, I intend to judge whether the Tsun clan is still qualified to lead Forest's Edge! Listen carefully to what Zuro Tsun says! And after doing so, decide the future of our tribe!」

We have finally made it this far.

Zuro Tsun's answers might lead to war between the Tsun and Wu clans.

If the Zaza house and Jean house abandoned the Tsun clan, Forest's Edge wouldn't be embroiled in civil war— what would happen in the end?

Donda Wu called Ludo Wu over and took the sabers in his hand. They probably belonged to Tay Tsun and Doddo Tsun. He handed one of them to Dan Lutim.

The tensed Tsun clan kins glared at Donda Wu.

「If the Tsun clan doesn't draw their blade, I swear to not draw mine! If the Tsun clan doesn't wish for blood to be spilled, none will flow tonight!」

Donda Wu knocked the door of the main house hard.

The door was opened from the inside unexpectedly quick.

「... It's already late in the night, may I ask what business do you have with us...?」

A female voice asked without a shred of emotion.

A beautiful lady was standing behind the door.

Despite her outstanding looks, her eyes were dead like a rotting fish.

She had brown hair and blue eyes. Her beautiful face was like a mud doll, devoid of any feelings.

Her hair was short, and she was between 25 and 30 years old. Her dressing indicated that she was married— a piece of cloth covered her body.

Zwei Tsun who was gone, just now appeared by her feet, clinging unhappily to this woman.

「Who might you be?」

Donda Wu narrowed his eyes and looked at the two of them.

「I'm the wife of the clan head Zuro, Aura Tsun... This is my daughter, the youngest of the Tsun clan, Zwei Tsun... How may I help you...?」

「I'm the head of the Wu clan Donda Wu. Can you help me relay to the head of the Tsun clan that Donda Wu wishes to meet with him?」

「I see... But he had already turned in...」

「Oh?」

Donda Wu laughed like a beast.

「Pardon me, but Zuro Tsun won't be able to sleep soundly tonight. The eldest son, second son, eldest daughter and a man from the branch house of the Tsun clan violated the laws of Forest's Edge. The clan head must answer for the crime of his members.」

「... Ohh...」

The Tsun clan woman who called herself Aura Tsun looked at us with dead, emotionless eyes.

In the end, when her murky eyes discovered Tay Tsun who was lying on the ground— she showed some signs of wavering.

Tay Tsun's grey hair was stained with red blood as he laid motionless. He was looking at Aura Tsun with a similar gaze.

「... I understand... Zwei, bring the clan head here...」

「Mama Aura, is that really fine?」

Zwei Tsun looked at her mother with her large eyes.

「Yes... It doesn't matter now...」

「I understand.」

Zwei Tsun charged back home.

Moments later, Zuro Tsun finally appeared.

The youngest son Mida Tsun followed closely behind.

「Head of the Wu clan, what is happening? It's rude to visit at such a late hour...」

There was a faint smile on Zuro Tsun's face, like a bloated toad.

Mida Tsun who was following slowly behind squealed in a high-pitched voice:

「Hmm...? It's Diga and Doddo... Why are they tied up...?」

「Yes... That's even more rude...」

「Rude? Zuro Tsun, didn't that girl already tell you about the entire thing?」

Dan Lutim asked.

「That girl」 was referring to Zwei Tsun. She seemed annoyed by Mida Tsun's fat leg blocking the entrance and kicked him before clinging to her mother again.

The clan head Zuro Tsun.

His spouse Aura Tsun.

Youngest daughter Zwei Tsun.

Youngest son Mida Tsun.

The eldest son who was sitting cross-legged unhappily, Diga Tsun.

The second son who remained unconscious, Doddo Tsun.

And— the one standing quietly in the distance, Yamiel Tsun.

Aside from the aged former clan head, everyone from the Tsun clan main house was here.

I supported Ai Fa's shoulder and gulped.

「The entire thing... Do you mean the matter about Diga and Yamiel proposing marriage to the head and hearth caretaker of the Fa house...?」

Despite having numerous eyes on him, Zuro Tsun remained unfazed and said:

「Diga and the others told me about the entire thing... I never imagined that they would carry out this plan during the night of the house head conference...」

「Oh? That means you condone the criminal acts of your offsprings?」

Donda Wu said with a fiercer smile, and Zuro Tsun tilted his head puzzledly.

「... Criminal acts? What do you mean by that... I don't understand...」

「Listen carefully then. These retards used poison herbs from a foreign land on everyone in the Ceremonial Hall, making them fall into deep slumber. They then attempted to kidnap the head and hearth caretaker of the Fa house. When the hearth caretaker refused to marry into the clan, they threatened him by pulling their blades. They also bonded the limbs of the Fa house head and attempted to have their way with her... Head and hearth caretaker of the Fa house, am I right?」

Ai Fa nodded silently, and I answered: 「That's correct.」

But a smile remained on Zuro Tsun's face.

He could still smile at a time like this. Was he fearless or apathetic? Probably the latter.

「Drawing blades, huh, sounds scary... So who committed such a lawless act...?」

「The second son of the main house, and the branch house man beside him.」

「Hmm... Doddo goes wild easily when he gets drunk...」

The corner of Zuro Tsun's mouth raised higher.

「He cherishes his sister a lot, and probably lost his reason when his sister's marriage proposal was rejected... I'm very sorry...」

「Zuro Tsun, do you think this matter can be resolved with just apologies? That hearth caretaker might hail from a foreign land, but he is still a member of the Fa house. My son who went to stop him suffered a head injury too. Your family didn't just brandish their blades, they also attempted to murder a fellow denizen of Forest's Edge!」

As there weren't any bandages, the Wu clan tied a piece of cloth around Ludo Wu's head to cover his wound. He clicked his tongue unhappily.

「In both the Post Station Town and the Lutim house wedding, that second son of yours brandished his blade to threaten others. This time, he finally swung his saber at a tribes mate. We can't forgive him just because you apologized.」

「Hmm... Then, do you think we should cut off his right arm as the law dictates...?」

「You think this matter can be settled with just a right arm?」

Donda Wu's eyes finally burst into flame, and a terrifying smile appeared on his face.

「He's right!」

A tall man forced his way through the crowd and roared angrily:

「The second son of the Tsun clan not only drew his blade, he also attempted to harm us with poison herbs! It could harm all the house heads except for the Tsun clan! One arm is too trivial a punishment for such an insidious crime!」

The one who spoke was the head of the Sauti clan, Dali Sauti.

His honest face was bright red from humiliation and rage.

Zuro Tsun— furrowed his brows a little.

「What poison herbs are you talking about... That herb made everyone in the Ceremonial Hall sleep soundly...?」

「I heard the herb was bought from a shaman that came from the eastern nation and is named meremere leaves. Your son told me proudly that he spent five white copper plates on it for just a tiny amount.」

I answered.

As I heard Diga Tsun saying that, I thought I should be the one to answer.

「Hmm... A herb that draws you into deep slumber...」

「Yes. When the herb is burned, it emits a smoke that will make you sleep, even if your stomach gets cut open.」

「I see... But it's just a herb that makes people sleep, so it's not really a poison herb, right?」

Zuro Tsun finally turned his gaze to his son.

Diga Tsun probably thought things were going smoothly and smiled.

「The effect of the meremere leaves is to let a person in pain sleep properly! Unless you inhale it for half a day, your soul won't fall into eternal rest. I only used a tiny amount, it can't be

considered poison! If I didn't know its effect, I wouldn't let my fellow denizens of Forest's Edge smell that thing.」

「Shut up! We are not talking about that!」

Dali Sauti roared agitated.

「The point is that you used an underhanded method! Not only did you deceive us, you even abducted the members of the Fa house, proposed marriage recklessly and made an attempt at their lives when they rejected you— Forest's Edge won't permit such lawless behavior!」

「We will not tolerate such atrocities... Diga, why did you do such a thing...?」

When he saw Dali Sauti's ferocious attitude, Diga Tsun turned pale. After hearing what his father said, he showed his ugly smile again.

「Of course, we weren't serious. Doddo and I were both drunk, so we said something we didn't mean.」

「Hmm? But the second son of the Tsun clan and that old man over there did draw their blades in an attempt to kill me and Asuta. What excuses will you find for that?」

When he heard Ludo Wu's accusation, Diga Tsun smiled even happier.

「I don't know either, I wasn't there. Doddo and Tay Tsun were both drunk, that's why they did such a thing.」

「Right. When they were swinging their sabers, you attempted to have your way with Ai Fa whose limbs were bound. But it failed.」

Ludo Wu shrugged, and Dali Sauti stepped forth again.

「Eldest son of the Tsun clan! This transgression is as serious as drawing a blade! You violated the same law two years ago, and were only forgiven after you swore not to do it again!」

「I already said that this was a marriage proposal, right? You have no right to admonish me so loudly.」

「This is retarded... You drugged her with poison herb, tied up her arms and legs before attempting to have your way with her. There's no such way of proposing in Forest's Edge!」

「... Huh? No matter how unwilling a woman is, if you bed her, she will submit to you, right?」

And of course, I took a step forward unconsciously. But Ai Fa knocked my head to stop me.

「Don't get agitated. He can't get away with jokes like that.」

Ai Fa quiet voice entered my ears.

Was that true?

In that case, why did Zuro Tsun and Diga Tsun looked so at ease?

Leaving the unreasonable Diga Tsun aside, even Zuro Tsun who was most concerned with protecting himself was smiling all this while, which made me uncomfortable.

「— Hey! What are you all doing!」

A sharp voice rang out at this moment.

The one who shouted was Rau Lei.

The men around us also became uneasy.

A group emerged and formed a human wall around all the house heads.

Their number was about thirty.

As it was dim outside, I could only see a group of dark figures approaching us. But in this village, the only other people here were the branch houses of the Tsun clan. From their numbers and logic, my analysis had to be true.

「Hey... Zuro Tsun, are you planning to end this with blades?」

Donda Wu grabbed the hilt of his saber.

For the first time, Zuro Tsun answered in a panicking voice:

「I-I don't intend to do that... The commotion caused by your people surprised the branch house members, and they are just here to take a look... Head of the Wu clan, don't be rash, alright...?」

「Hmmp, is that so?」

Donda Wu's mouth twisted menacingly.

The Tsun clan branch house had 30 people, half of them were men. The kins of the Wu clan matched them in number, but only five were armed.

If a fight broke out, there was no telling how the Dom, Zaza, and other kins of the Tsun clan would act. Furthermore, all the women of the Wu clan were here. Nothing good would come out of resorting to violence.

Donda Wu knew this better than me and called out to Ludo Wu.

「Hey Ludo, go to the women. Do not attack preemptively.」

「Understood.」

Ludo Wu also showed the eyes of a hunter as he ran to his family's side.

「Alright then, Zuro Tsun. How are you planning to settle this? Don't tell me you think we will forgive you just by apologizing, right?」

「Hmm... Head of the Wu clan, do you think we should mete out punishment according to the laws of Forest's Edge...?」

A faint smile appeared on Zuro Tsun's face again.

「Doddo and Tay Tsun drew their blade and hurt a fellow Forest's Edge denizen. Diga almost assaulted a woman. Basically, Doddo and Tay Tsun have to surrender their right arm. Diga... What should be done about Diga? In the end, the head of the Fa house's purity wasn't tarnished, right?」

「That's because the head of the Fa house just happened to be mightier than that despicable man. If we follow the laws of Forest's Edge strictly, he has to be castrated.」

Donda Wu said with detest.

「That's not all. They deceived the fellow tribemates of Forest's Edge and drugged everyone with the poison herb. How will you pay for these crimes?」

「That's what I want to clarify with everyone. The herbs they burned are not harmful to the body, so how serious is this crime... No, are their actions even against the laws of Forest's Edge...」

「The denizens of Forest's Edge must not deceive fellow tribemates!」

「When did Diga and the rest deceive their tribemates...? Diga merely sent everyone into deep slumber in order to avoid disturbing them when he proposed marriage to the Fa house...」

Dali Sauti walked quietly towards Zuro Tsun.

Donda Wu restrained his buffed body.

「If that is so, Zuro Tsun, are you going to surrender the right arm of the second son and the branch house man, and castrate your eldest son? I don't think your sons have the guts.」

「If we dispense out the punishment as dictated by our archaic laws, this will be the right course of actions.」

Zuro Tsun smiled menacingly.

「Head of the Wu clan, if you want to respect this ancient custom... and judge my sons, you have to do one thing first...?」

「What?」

「I hope the Wu clan, Lutim house, and Fa house can obey the rules too...」

Zuro Tsun's obsessive eyes looked my way.

「Hearth caretaker of the Fa house... My daughter wants you to marry into the Tsun clan, right...?」

I stared at his disgusting smile.

Could it be...

A sense of suspicion started pressuring my chest.

Could this be the ace in the hole this unscrupulous man was planning?

Was he planning to resort to such a retarded and nonsensical move?

「Yamiel was conducting an ancient ritual passed down from our ancestors... a ritual to absorb the power of the kiba blood into our own strength...」

「.....」

「... If that is the case, she should be naked...」

「Zuro Tsun, you little—」

Donda Wu uttered a voice as deep as the earth tremor.

「Head of the Wu clan, your son was hiding in the shadows to protect the hearth tender of the Fa house, right...? In that case, didn't he see Yamiel through the window...?」

Zuro Tsun turned towards Dan Lutim who was beside Donda Wu.

「Head of the Lutim house... You kicked down the door of Diga's house, and entered without permission from a house member, right...?」

「And so?」

Dan Lutim was getting angrier by the moment.

Everyone seemed to understand what Zuro Tsun was getting at.

「It is a violation of the Forest's Edge law to barge into a house without permission from the family... In that case, the ones who saw Yamiel's naked body will have to hand over an eye, and those who stepped into Diga's house have to hand over a toe, right...?」

「What kind of joke is this!? What about this despicable man also barged into the Fa house without invitation!?」

「Diga and I already apologized for it, and were forgiven... We don't wish to see fellow denizens spilling blood because of these archaic rules either...」

「So that's what this is all about.」

Donda Wu muttered.

He had a ferocious smile.

「If I want them to surrender their arms, our side will need to offer up an eye and a toe. Is that what you mean, Zuro Tsun?」

「... I don't wish to see my fellow tribesmates spilling blood for such a trivial matter...」

「Zuro Tsun, what is this nonsense!?!」

Dali Sauti shouted.

「The ones who committed the crimes are members of the Tsun clan! The Wu clan, Lutim house, and Fa house were only resisting their violence! Why must they hand over an eye and a toe!」

「This is the rule of Forest's Edge... However, this is an archaic law decided by our forebears... We can be more flexible about the rules to resolve this matter...」

「I already said that is not the point! We can't condone the despicable acts by the eldest son of the Tsun clan!」

「Despicable acts... Doddo didn't take any lives, and Diga didn't dishonor any woman, correct...?」

「Like what Donda Wu said, that's because of the prowess of the Fa house and Wu clan members! If they were weak, the Tsun clan members would have committed these unforgivable acts!」

「If they really committed these crimes, they can only pay for it with their lives...」

Both sides insisted on their argument.

Dali Sauti was so enraged that he looked dumbfounded.

「Tribal chief, are you still sane...? If this is what you truly think, we can't respect you as the tribal chief of Forest's Edge anymore.」

「Oh? Head of the Sauti clan, why is that...? Diga and Doddo are immature and can't control their emotions well. But they didn't murder fellow denizens or tarnish the purity of a woman. No one can know if my sons really intended to commit these crimes...?」

Zuro Tsun turned his murky eyes towards Donda Wu.

「Look, the head of the Wu clan is looking with such intense hatred in his eyes... Maybe he wishes to harm me... However, if he doesn't swing his blade at me, he won't need to be judged... That's how it is...」

「You are just finding excuses for yourself! The tribal chief clan should be the model for the denizens of Forest's Edge!」

「Yes... In that case, blood will have to be spilled on both sides... Such a shame...」

Zuro Tsun didn't show a shred of regret when he was saying that.

Maybe... This was what this man sincerely thought. Since he couldn't resolve this matter with his glib tongue, he could only hand over his sons.

Was he attempting to trade the lives of Diga Tsun, Doddo Tsun, Tay Tsun, and Yamiel Tsun in exchange for the peace of the Tsun clan? Zuro Tsun was still smiling without any sense of danger, which made me think that way.

Suppressing the frustration in my chest, I peeked at the children of the Tsun clan.

Diga Tsun still didn't grasp the magnitude of the situation and was still grinning.

Doddo Tsun was still knocked out.

Tay Tsun stared at the sky with his muddy eyes, lying on the ground as if he was dead.

Yamiel Tsun was still expressionless.

It was difficult for me to forgive these criminals.

There was something about Tay Tsun and Yamiel Tsun that bothered me, but that couldn't absolve them of their crimes.

However, they were still the family of Zuro Tsun, tied to him by blood, correct?

Even if Diga Tsun and the others lost control and committed these crimes, shouldn't Zuro Tsun work harder to cover up for them?

Compared to the lives of his family, does he value his own peace more?

Just what kind of world was reflected in the murky eyes of this man?

「...Zuro Tsun, is that your answer?」

Donda Wu took a small step forward.

At this moment, Mida Tsun who had been standing still in a daze said quietly:

「You can't... denizens of Forest's Edge can't hurt each other...」

He muttered as he reached for the club on his waist.

Donda Wu also moved his hands towards the hilt of the saber.

Zuro Tsun's smile turned a little twisted as he backed away slowly.

「...Asuta, absolutely don't leave my side.」

Ai Fa whispered. She removed her right arm from my neck and leaned forward a little.

All the men within my field of vision were getting ready for battle.

Negotiations had broken down.

Zuro Tsun wouldn't admit his own wrongdoings. He wanted to save himself even if he had to sacrifice his own family.

Donda Wu wouldn't permit such corrupt acts. Even if he had to shoulder the tarnished name of a traitor, even if he has to break his promise of 「not drawing his blade first」, he will kill Zuro Tsun. There was such determination in his eyes.

As Donda Wu was about to act—

I shouted after hesitating for half a second:

「Please wait! If the Tsun clan really respects the rules that have been passed down, shouldn't you atone for a certain crime first!？」

Donda Wu was about to pull out his saber, but his shoulders shook a little.

「Asuta...?」

Ai Fa leaned in close with a puzzled face. I nodded at her and continued:

「If I remember correctly, it's a serious crime with the punishment of scalping one's head. You must pay for this crime before you can punish others, right?」

「You... What are you talking about...?」

The toad-like smile from his fat face was gone. I was certain that it wasn't my imagination when I saw the fear in his expression.

My words might lead to more blood being spilled... This thought made me shiver, but I still revealed their crimes.

「If you want to refute my words, let me see the food store of the Tsun clan main house... That is my only demand.」

The next instant, I could hear maniacal laughter.

It was Yamiel Tsun.

Surrounded by the women of the Wu clan and Lutim house, Yamiel Tsun threw her head back in laughter.

「What are you saying? Why must our heads be scalped? You are slandering the chief clan!」

「T-That's right, this is slander! You are saying nonsense just to save your own hide...」

Zuro Tsun quickly recovered, but he was hit by great shock and despair the next moment.

「We can't stand for such humiliation! There are no grounds for such slander! If you don't believe us, then go check the food store with your own eyes!」

「Yamiel!? Have you gone mad, what nonsense are you saying!?!」

The one shouting wasn't Zuro Tsun, but Diga Tsun.

His face was as pale as his father.

「What's the matter? Why is the color gone from your faces? We are innocent, right?」

Yamiel Tsun's eyes were shining as she looked towards Aura Tsun who was standing at the side like a statue.

「Aura! Zwei is fine too! Remove the bar on the food store's door! Then we can prove our innocence!」

Zwei Tsun looked at her mother's face doubtfully.

Aura Tsun closed her eyes, covering her murky gaze.

「Yes... Yamiel, that's what we should do...」

「That's right! We should do that!」

When Aura Tsun was about to turn, Zuro Tsun grabbed her slender shoulder with great force.

「Stop! What are you..... What are you trying to do!?!」

「... Please let me go...」

「I can't do that! As the clan head... I forbid you to do so!」

Zuro Tsun's thick fingers sunk into his wife's shoulder.

「Hyaa...」

「What are you doing!」

Aura Tsun wailed, and Zwei Tsun screamed too.

Donda Wu took a step forth.

But before he could act Mida Tsun already grabbed his father's arm.

「You can't... We can't hurt our family...」

With the creaking sound of bones, Zuro Tsun screamed like a girl.

After Zuro Tsun unhandled her, Aura Tsun collapsed weakly to the ground and stared at Zwei Tsun's face. Tears filled her eyes, and a bit of light had finally returned to her gaze.

「Zwei... Take down the bar on the food store's door...」

「... I understand.」

Zwei Tsun disappeared at the other end of the door.

Yamiel Tsun laughed diabolically again.

「Come! Witness with your own eyes! Asuta of the Fa house, if what you said is baseless slander, we won't forgive you with just an eye or a toe!」

「What is that woman doing? Has she gone mad?」

Dan Lutim frowned his thick brows unhappily and turned towards me.

「I don't know what she is saying. Did you get tricked by that woman?」

「No, I don't think so... If I was really tricked, Zuro Tsun wouldn't panic so much.」

I turned to Donda Wu.

「Let's head to the food store. But we need to keep an eye on the Tsun clan branch house.」

Donda Wu looked at me silently for a moment, then turned away.

Rau Lei and the other kins of the Wu clan dragged Diga Tsun and Doddo Tsun with them.

Diga Tsun was in a daze and looked lost.

Doddo Tsun was still unconscious.

As for Tay Tsun— He had shut his eyes just like Aura Tsun just now.

「Mida Tsun, can you bring Zuro Tsun with us?」

「Yes...」

When he heard what I said, his cheeks shook a little.

「What's wrong with the food store...? We can only eat tomorrow morning...」

「Yes. We just want to check what is inside the food store.」

We went around to the back of the house.

The men who attended the house head conference, the women who tended to the hearth, members of the Tsun clan main house and branch house— a large number of people had gathered, there were over a hundred people here.

Most of them didn't understand what was happening right now and were looking at each other quietly.

In front of us— the door of the food store was opened slowly from the inside.

Zwei Tsun still had an unhappy face. She came out from the food store and clung to her mother's leg again.

Rau Lei lifted a candle and shone on the inside of the food store.

「This is—!」

Everyone was yelling now.

The content of the food store was just what I thought.

It was filled with colorful fruits and vegetables.

Some familiar, and others not.

The shelves full of fruits and vegetables were—

From the Morga Forest, which the Rock City had prohibited us from foraging.

「... So that's what happened.」

Donda Wu mumbled to himself.

And then—

「Oooohhhhhh...」 Voices that sounded like chants suddenly shook the night.

「What the hell? What's going on!?!」

Dan Lutim looked around him.

This noise came from all the branch house members of the Tsun clan.

Be it men or women, young or old— they all knelt on the ground and wailed with sorrow.

「Please forgive us...」

「We violated the taboo...」

「We violated the taboo, and picked the resources from the forest...」

Aura Tsun also knelt weakly before us.

「This is the sin of the Tsun clan... But please have mercy on the branch houses... They were just following the evil orders set by the main house...」

Her pretty face was stained with tears.

All the branch house members were crying too.

Some laid prone on the ground, some grabbed their heads, others clung to the ones beside them — all of them were consumed with sorrow and cried in deep sadness.

「W-Wait! Get a hold of yourself!」

At this moment, the cry of a panicking girl sounded out, her voice was exceptionally clear.

It was Lala Wu's panicked shouts.

A frail girl thinner than Lala Wu was clinging to her crying.

She kept shouting: 「Sorry, sorry...」

She was Tulu Tsun from the Tsun clan branch house.

「How could this be... The Tsun clan actually violated such a serious taboo...」

When he heard the sounds of crying from all around him, the head of the Zaza house seemed to be in shock, and he muttered weakly with his large body trembling.

The members of the Tsun clan ate the resources from the forest. In Forest's Edge, this was one of the most serious taboos.

If they ate the flora in the forest, the famished kiba will attack the farms in the city more frequently. Hence, those who transgressed this taboo will face severe punishment— 「scalping」 .

No matter how hungry they were, the denizens of Forest's Edge wouldn't steal the food growing in the forest. They will just lament their powerlessness and wither away. Kamyua Yost once commented that he had never seen such a righteous and pure tribe.

This was the pride the denizens of Forest's Edge had as hunters.

「We tarnished on the honor of the hunters... and trampled on the pride of Forest's Edge... we are sinners beyond redemption...」

Aura Tsun and the branch house members cried rivers of tears.

I could clearly see the sorrow in their teary eyes.

The regrets in their heart.

The shame that welled up from their chest.

They were all negative emotions— but all the Tsun clan members showed their emotions and weren't just mud dolls anymore.

When the grave crimes committed by the Tsun clan came to light, the members of the Tsun clan branch houses were also liberated.

They were freed from the enormous pressure of hiding the Tsun clan's secrets.

On the other hand, Zuro Tsun and Diga Tsun looked ash faced and were quivering.

Doddo Tsun was still knocked out on the ground.

Mida Tsun looked at his father and brother puzzledly.

Zwei Tsun accompanied her crying mother and bit on her lips.

As for Yamiel Tsun—

Flanked by Ludo Wu and Mama Mia Lei, she walked towards us.

Ai Fa tensed her body cautiously, but Yamiel Tsun stopped before us and said quietly:

「It's all over now...」

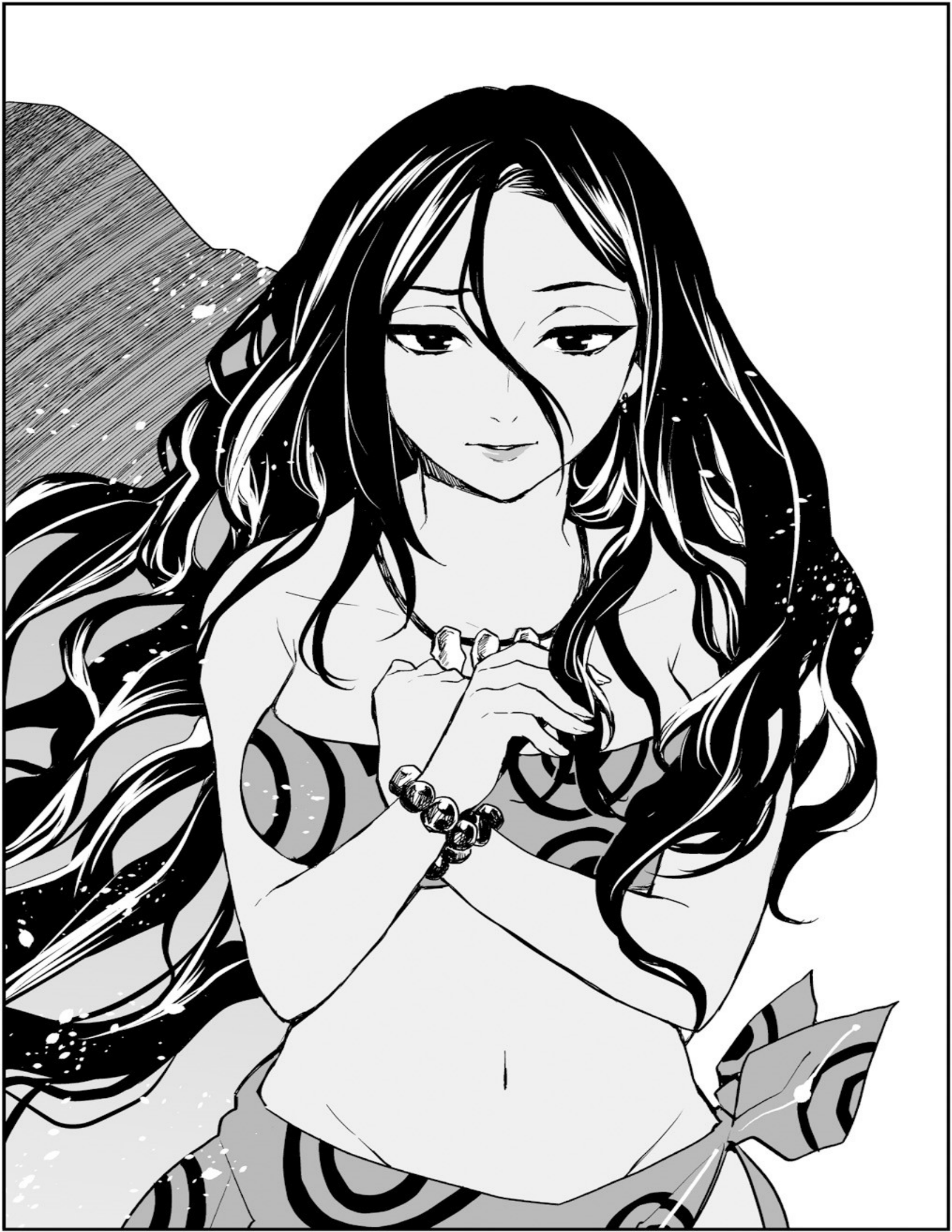
Yamiel Tsun's crazed self was gone. She looked at peace with complicated emotions in her eyes, making it impossible to discern if that was sorrow, anger or joy.

「Asuta... I have something to tell you.」

「What is it?」

I still couldn't grasp the feelings of Yamiel Tsun. She showed a faint smile— and then said:

「Thank you for destroying the Tsun clan.」



Part 3

The chaotic night was over.

「Hmm～」

I crawled out of the Ceremonial Hall and stretched my arms as the morning light made me squint my eyes.

「... What an unbelievable night.」

Ai Fa followed me in leaving the Ceremonial Hall and stood beside me with a deadpan expression.

「That's right, everything was too outrageous and unreal. What will happen to Forest's Edge now?」

「Who knows... Never mind, it can't be worse than now. Our duty is to avoid letting Forest's Edge become more corrupted.」

The effect of the meremere leaves was gone, and Ai Fa's face was filled with energy, as she flicked her long hair behind her.

As we were talking, the other house heads also came out. To make way for them, we decided to take a stroll nearby.

The emergency house head conference that spanned the entire night was now over.

Through the interrogation of all the house heads, we obtained a deeper understanding of the Tsun clan's crimes.

First off, the Tsun clan had started stealing food from the forest more than a decade ago.

Zuro Tsun inherited the position of tribal chief only ten years ago. Therefore, these atrocious acts were started and handed down from the previous tribal chief, Zattsu Tsun.

They only hunted kiba for their meat and foraged the fruits and vegetables they needed from the forest. They used the prize money and the tusks and horns to trade for daily necessities, fruit wine, and rock salt— as well as the entertainment expenses for the Tsun clan main house.

They threatened the branch houses to keep this secret, and if words were to get out, everyone in the Tsun clan would get scalped. Which meant, the main house forced the branch houses to be their accomplices. During this decade or so, they had stripped the branch houses of their pride and dignity as a denizen in Forest's Edge.

That might be the reason why the people in the Tsun clan village tended to die young. Their lives were more stable and prosperous than the other houses, but members of their village would grow weak and die for unknown reasons.

「Perhaps our lives were too stable, so we couldn't find the reason to live...」

Aura Tsun said.

People who married into the village were especially susceptible to that. Aside from Aura Tsun, the previous wives of the clan head Zuro Tsun were from the Zaza and Jean houses.

In addition, those who couldn't adapt to such a unique environment tended to pass away early too. Because their members were short-lived, the Tsun clan was slowly running short of numbers. Hence, they strictly prohibited any Tsun clan members from marrying into other kin houses.

If the branch house members stayed in the village, they would be forced by peer pressure to hide the secret. So it was only natural for them to stop any Tsun clan member who knew this secret from leaving the village.

However, such a move would be too unnatural. Forest's Edge placed a lot of emphasis on blood relations, and since no kin houses took in a member of the Tsun clan through marriage, their unhappiness about this situation would slowly build up. That was why Yamiel Tsun said— 「We can't deceive our kins any longer...」 .

Why did the Tsun clan attempt to pull the Fa house members into their clan?

The Tsun clan wanted to use the copper plates I earned to buy aria and poitan and create an environment where they could survive without stealing from the forest.

They could then let their horrible secret disappear.

「What the hell!? That's too retarded! You all just need to hunt kiba properly!」

Many of the house heads, including Dan Lutim were furious.

The main house members of the Tsun clan who had a taste of depravity— or rather, the head of the Tsun clan Zuro Tsun— didn't even consider the option of hunting again.

Besides, even if they wanted to hunt kiba, the vicinity around the Tsun clan village couldn't attract kiba anymore.

It was inevitable. They foraged the forest's fruits and vegetables, which was the food of the kiba, every day, so of course the kiba wouldn't want to stay in such a barren place.

This was also the reason why the number of kiba had been increasing for the past few years.

The Tsun clan didn't hunt properly, resulting in the number of kiba increasing. The resources in the forest were also stolen by them, so the kiba migrated to other zones— this led to the increase in the burden of the other houses.

No matter what, the situation kept deteriorating. As there weren't any kiba around the Tsun clan village, even if the branch house members wished to ignore the main house's orders and pick up hunting again, they couldn't do so. In the Tsun clan village, meat was more scarce than vegetables since they could only hunt the minimal number of kiba.

From another perspective, the dwindling number of kiba resulted in the gradual increase of small animals like lizards and snakes, which the branch house members often ate. The main house members would buy Kimyusu or Karon meat to fill their stomachs.

「By the way, did you really need to pick the day of the house head conference to assault the Fa house members? If you were planning to abduct them by force, you didn't need to invite them to the Tsun clan village, and could just attack the Fa house directly, correct?」

Dali Sauti asked.

Since the Tsun clan possessed the secret weapon, the meremere leaves, they could carry out such a barbaric act. If Ai Fa and I both fell into deep slumber, they could cut the wooden bars on the windows, and gain access easily.

Yamiel Tsun answered this question.

Simply put— because the Ceremonial Hall was designed to be half underground and the entrances weren't locked, they just had to quietly place the burning meremere leaves at the entrance to knock everyone out. Normal houses would bar their windows, so it wouldn't be easy to get the smoke into the room.

That was true. If they fanned the smoke in from outside the window as if they were grilling saury, Ai Fa would notice.

「... I still think your actions are too foolish. You actually tried such a vicious stunt with all the house heads present during the house head conference, did you really think it would work? I might not be qualified to say that since I was sound asleep at that time, but this wasn't a scheme a normal person would come up with.」

「That's right... But I heard that the head of the Fa house is very strong, so Diga and Doddo are probably no match for her. So instead of attacking the Fa house, we thought this method has a better chance of success.」

Yamiel Tsun answered calmly. Dali Sauti stared at her with rage in his eyes.

「Eldest daughter of the Tsun clan, let me confirm again. Zuro Tsun was the one who suggested making the Fa house members join the Tsun clan, both you and your two brothers agreed to this and came up with a plan to do so?」

「Yes, it's as you say.」

「Even though the Tsun clan's eldest son, second son and branch family member Tay Tsun are the ones who committed the crimes, you are as guilty as they are.」

「I know that very well, you don't need to keep reminding me.」

Yamiel Tsun's expression seemed overly peaceful.

「Please wait.」

I wanted to speak up.

At this moment, Ai Fa grabbed my arm.

「Stop. Now isn't the time for us to speak.」

The Tsun clan's method was too unrefined.

That made me think of something. Maybe Yamiel Tsun wanted the plan to fail— what she wished for wasn't the prosperity of the Tsun clan, but its demise.

Yamiel Tsun was the one who invited me to partake in the house head conference.

She came up with this plan first and received approval from the clan head Zuro Tsun later.

No matter what, there were more cons than pros in choosing the night of the house head conference to commit these crimes.

The food store was barred, but it contained an astonishing secret. I didn't think that normal people would let the members from another house near such a place. Yamiel Tsun once asked me:

「After tending to the Tsun clan's hearth, didn't you realize anything at all?」

Yamiel Tsun might have wanted to overcome this obstacle with her family and continue to live like they always had.

However, she wished more strongly for the end of the Tsun clan's history of corruption.

「I can guess what you're thinking, but don't say it... No matter what you say, it won't lessen the crimes of that eldest daughter. It might make the other house heads even madder.」

After Ai Fa whispered that to me, I asked in a quiet voice:

「But why?」

「Even if your speculations are right, the eldest daughter of the Tsun clan still betrayed Forest's Edge. And you might add another crime of 『betraying and deceiving blood-related family』 ... Asuta, in Forest's Edge, betraying and harming one's family is the greatest taboo.」

I couldn't refute her.

Hence, in order to expose the crimes of the whole Tsun clan, she intentionally brought in people from the outside— and invited the Fa house and Wu clan to the Tsun clan.

As I was pondering over that, the house head conference continued in all seriousness.

All the house heads needed to reach a conclusion quickly for one issue.

The punishment of the Tsun clan members.

「Tsun clan has lost the right to lead the tribe!」

No one opposed Dali Sauti's declaration.

However, how should the Tsun clan members atone for their crimes?

Fortunately, no one wanted to prosecute the branch house members for their part. Even the Zaza and Jean houses that emphasized on traditions so much didn't do so.

So, who should be responsible then?

Everyone's opinion at this point was divided.

We should follow the rules and scalp the heads of all the Tsun clan main house members—

If we go by the books, then the branch house members will need to be purged too —

In that case, just punishing the clan head Zuro Tsun will do—

But he only inherited the sins of the previous clan head—

The previous clan head Zattsu Tsun is old and ravaged by illness, he doesn't have much time left—

No, if we do that—

「Sigh, this is so noisy! We can't reach a conclusion even if we continue this discussion!」

Dan Lutim was finally at his limits.

He stared at me with his large eyes.

「Asuta, what do you think?」

「Ehh? Me?」

「Yes. You revealed the crimes of the Tsun clan, so you should be chairing this meeting, right?」

He wasn't making any sense.

However, I was grateful for the opportunity to speak. I did have something on my mind.

「I think— the important thing is to moving forward.」

「Moving forward?」

「Yes. We shouldn't punish the Tsun clan main house in the heat of the moment, the important thing is that the denizens of Forest's Edge need to proceed in the right direction— we need to make arrangements for that.」

「You are just like Kaslan Lutim, always using such difficult words. Can you make it simpler?」

「Pardon me. Specifically, we have lost our tribal chief clan. Instead of deciding on the punishment of the Tsun clan, we should discuss how we should maintain our relationship with Genos in the future.」

Dan Lutim and the other house heads all looked surprised.

They never thought I would mention Genos at a time like this.

「I still don't understand. Rock City isn't important to us, and we don't want the prize money either. I think that this will be a good chance for Forest's Edge to cut off ties with the castle, that will be even better.」

「We can't do that. 『Do not pick the resources of the forest』 is a rule set by Genos. The Tsun clan's action is like trampling over the trust and bonds between Forest's Edge and Genos... In the first place, the denizens of Forest's Edge only received permission to stay here after agreeing to this rule.」

The house heads started debating among themselves.

「Genos thinks the denizens of Forest's Edge are indispensable. It took us eight decades to build up such a position. If we leave this land, it will be a huge blow to the prosperity of Genos. Therefore, I think we should continue to interact with Genos in a proper manner.」

「Hmm... Well... After hearing you say that, I think you are right...」

Dan Lutim still looked confused. After all, aside from the Tsun clan, no other denizens of Forest's Edge had any interaction with the people of the Genos castle.

In order to share my worries with the other denizens, I threw out a bomb hidden in my heart.

「What I'm about to say is just my speculation. Maybe— the people in Genos castle already knew about the Tsun clan breaking the rules, and they condone them in doing so.」

「What!? What is going on!?」

「Ai Fa and I met a person who is acquainted with the lord of Genos. That person was very worried about the Tsun clan's depraved behavior and had warned the landlord several times. Even if the landlord didn't know about the Tsun clan stealing from the forest, he must know that the Tsun clan isn't doing their job as hunters properly and is living a depraved life.」

This sparked more discussion amongst the house heads.

Although this was like kicking a dog when it's down— I still needed to say this.

「I have already confirmed that even if the Tsun clan misbehaves in the Post Station Town, the Genos castle will still turn a blind eye to them. I also heard that the denizens of Forest's Edge won't be prosecuted no matter what crimes they commit. The Tsun clan didn't become this depraved because of the prize money alone. The special treatment from Genos also contributed to this, correct?」

I turned my gaze to the Tsun clan main house members at the lower seats.

Aside from the previous clan head Zattsu Tsun, all seven of them were here.

Zuro Tsun was lifeless like a corpse.

Diga Tsun was trembling with fear.

Doddo Tsun had finally woken up and was sullen like a dying dog.

Mida Tsun didn't know what was happening.

Yamiel Tsun was expressionless as she stared at the floor.

Aura Tsun kept her back straight and stared into space with moist eyes.

Zwei Tsun had a sulky face as she held her mother's arm.

Tay Tsun might be from the branch house, but he was brought here since he violated a taboo. He sat at the very end with his eyes closed.

「I have no intentions of covering for the Tsun clan. But the reasons for them becoming depraved are the prize money and the way they interacted with the lord of Genos. If we interact with Genos in the wrong manner, even the denizens of Forest's Edge will become depraved.」

「Asuta, it sounds like you are disparaging the denizens of Forest's Edge.」

Dali Sauti said. He wasn't angry, but his tone was tense.

I turned and asked him:

「Is that so? The Tsun clan used to be a powerful family that led Forest's Edge, correct? Over eight decades, the poison accumulated over time and led to the downfall of the Tsun clan. That's

because only the Tsun clan had interactions with the people from the castle— since I'm getting excessive wealth and interacting with the people in town, this will affect me too.」

「Yes...」

「Wealth can be medicine, but it can also become poison. We already discussed this during dinner. Who will replace the Tsun clan and lead Forest's Edge in their stead? What should we do with the prize money? How should we interact with Genos? All these matters are as important as the punishment of the Tsun clan, right?」

「You are correct. However, only the Wu clan can match the Tsun clan right now. Now that the Tsun clan had fallen— what should we do?」

Dali Sauti looked at Donda Wu probingly.

Donda Wu showed a fearless smile.

「How long are you guys planning to nag instead of sleeping? A strong clan will step up to lead Forest's Edge. Weak houses are powerless to rule Forest's Edge. This is an obvious fact.」

「So the Wu clan will officially run for the position of the tribal chief?」

「Hah! I already knew that the Tsun clan will be destroyed one day. It's only a matter of time before we walk this path.」

Donda Wu stood up slowly. He scanned the surroundings with hunter's eyes.

「I am speaking in my capacity as the head of the Wu clan to all fellow house heads of Forest's Edge. The Wu clan has six kin houses and numbers over a hundred people. There are no other clans more powerful than us in Forest's Edge... Anyone disagrees with me?」

No one sounded any objection.

A fearless smile appeared on Donda Wu's lips.

「On the other hand, the Tsun clan has seven kin houses and over a hundred people. Excluding the Tsun clan that committed grave atrocities, there are around 70 left... Who will lead you now? The Zaza house? Or the Dom house?」

「We can't decide yet. Right now, the Zaza, Jean and Dom house will work together to lead our kins.」

The head of the Zaza house answered quietly with flickering flames of regret in his eyes.

「I see.」

Donda Wu looked towards Dali Sauti.

「Next will be the Sauti clan. How many blood-related kins do you have?」

「The Sauti clan has five kin houses. There are about 60 of us, far less than the Wu clan.」

「Hmm. But even so, your scale isn't much different from the northern houses that had lost the Tsun clan.」

Donda Wu said with satisfaction, and the flame in his eyes got even more intense.

「In that case, I propose that the Wu clan, Sauti clan, as well as one of the northern houses, for example, Zaza, lead the denizens of Forest's Edge who had lost their tribal chief.」

「What did you say!?!」

The head of house Zaza yelled.

「Head of the Wu clan, are you suggesting for the Wu clan, Sauti clan and us to become the tribal chiefs? What do you mean!?!」

「It means literally what you heard. The Wu clan might be powerful, but Forest's Edge is a wide and narrow strip of land, it's impossible for one clan to control the entire Forest's Edge. Since there are influential clans in the southern and northern ends, we should make use of their strengths.」

「But if we do that...」

「The three clans will rule the Forest's Edge together. Be it interacting with Genos or the dissemination of the prize money, the three clan heads will share the load. We will turn this into our medicine and not poison. If you have a better idea, then let's hear it. I'm posing this question not only to the Zaza and Sauti but also the heads of all the houses.」

Donda Wu strong eyes surveyed all the house heads once again.

「If another clan that can rival the Wu or Sauti clan is to rise up, I will agree to let him take on the position of tribal chief. If only one person rules the Forest's Edge, our future will be cut off if that person becomes corrupted. The Tsun clan is the best example of this.」

Zuro Tsun didn't show any reaction.

The previous clan head passed on his twisted ways to this tribal chief of the Forest's Edge, leading him to depravity. Zuro Tsun was crestfallen and hung his head low.

「Those who concur stand up! Those who oppose remain seated and state your views!」

The kins of the Wu clan stood up swiftly.

The heads of the minor houses also got up one after another. Ai Fa and I also stood up.

The northern and southern houses mulled over it slowly.

After hearing Donda Wu suddenly naming them as tribal chief, they were probably surprised and troubled.

Even so, Dali Sauti still stood up— finally, the heads of Zaza and Dom houses also got up.

Everyone agreed to Donda Wu's proposal unanimously.

Donda Wu nodded seriously.

「The head of the Wu clan Donda Wu solemnly swears that he will not abandon the honor of Forest's Edge and will work together with Sauti and Zaza to pave the right way forward for the denizens of Forest's Edge.」

「... The head of the Sauti clan Dali Sauti vows to be a pillar of Forest's Edge.」

The kins of the Tsun clan stood to the side dejectedly. After a while the head of the Zaza house muttered softly:

「We will elect the head of our kins in the near future. I swear that no matter who becomes our leader, he will not bring shame to the denizens of Forest's Edge.」

「How laid back. The first thing you all need to do is to elect the leader of your kins.」

Donda Wu curled the corners of his mouth and laughed, and the head of house Zaza immediately replied: 「Shut up!」

「Alright then, aside from the Sauti clan and the representative from house Zaza, everyone can sit easy... We still have one thing that needs to be dealt with on this night.」

Heeding his instructions, we all sat down.

Donda Wu controlled the entire situation.

「How should we deal with the Tsun clan? The three of us have to state our own views, and then ask for the opinions of the other house heads.」

Donda Wu's words made the atmosphere tense.

「I think... we should sentence the Tsun clan members who committed crimes on this night, as well as the clan head Zuro Tsun.」

Dali Sauti replied immediately:

「The eldest son Diga Tsun, the second son Doddo Tsun, the eldest daughter Yamiel Tsun and Tay Tsun from the branch house. Including Zuro Tsun, these five are guilty beyond any doubt.」

「Hmmm, in that case, Zuro Tsun will take responsibility alone for the matter of the Tsun clan stealing from the forest... And so, how do you plan to deal with the eldest daughter of the Tsun clan who didn't draw her blade?」

「Regarding that... It's hard to decide, but since the eldest daughter is the one who instigated the eldest son and the rest, I think she should receive the same punishment.」

Which means that her right arm would be chopped off just like Doddo Tsun and Tay Tsun?

A bitter taste spread in my mouth.

What the head of the Zaza house said next was even more cruel:

「I think all the members of the main house should be punished. It is a serious crime to steal from the forest, and they even forced the branch houses to do the same. I think all of them should be scalped.」

「I see. But are the women from the main house capable of forcing the branch houses? We forgave the branch house members, but, isn't that unfair, ending the lives of the main house women?」

「Yes... I already considered that... The branch house members should receive the same punishment. But the main house will redeem the sins of the branch houses with their blood instead.」

So they are sentencing even the young Zwei Tsun to death?

These might be the customs of the cruel and righteous Forest's Edge, but I couldn't stand for that.

「... Can I say something?」

At this moment Yamiel Tsun spoke.

Numerous murderous gaze looked her way.

「It seems that you all don't know anything, so let me tell you... The former head of the Tsun clan Zattsu Tsun is the true reason behind the corruption of the Tsun clan.」

The murderous aura of the house heads gradually increased.

But Yamiel maintained her cool demeanor and spoke plainly:

「Zattsu Tsun is like a venom. If you spend time with him, your soul will gradually become corrupt. Before he fell sick from illness ten-odd years ago, he was the head of the Tsun clan and corrupted the souls of the main house members.」

「Hah! I was wondering what you will say, so you want to push all the blame to the bedridden Zattsu Tsun, how deplorable!」

The head of the Zaza house roared angrily.

Yamiel Tsun remained calm and stole a glance his way:

「I won't push all the sin to that man. What I want to say is that some of us have not been poisoned by him yet... Aura Tsun married into the main house a dozen years ago, and Zwei Tsun was born right then. Mida Tsun is missing a part of his soul... Zattsu Tsun didn't corrupt their souls, so they should receive the same punishment as the branch house members.」

Yamiel Tsun remained seated, but bowed her head low with her forehead touching the ground.

「Hence, since you are forgiving the branch house members, I hope you can show mercy to these three... Only the souls of the rest of us are rotten.」

「What are you saying!? That's too strange!」

Zwei Tsun wasn't tied up as she was still young, and she kept jumping like a spring-loaded doll.

Ludo Wu who was supposed to watch them blocked her way, and grabbed the Zwei Tsun's collar.

「Hey brat, don't move.」

「Shut up! Yamiel worries about the Tsun clan's future the most! Why must she die!」

「This is the only way for the Tsun clan to redeem ourselves.」

Yamiel Tsun raised her head with a faint smile.

「I was born earlier than Diga and Doddó. That's why I'm contaminated by more of Zattsu Tsun's venom than them. My soul is already rotten beyond salvation.」

「This has nothing to do with the timing of our birth! Yamiel, you... you are our family!」

Tears sprung out from Zwei Tsun's big eyes.

With Ludo Wu still grabbing her collar, she glared at her father and brothers.

「You are always the ones to commit crimes! Yamiel is only like this because you are so weak! What is so scary about our bedridden grandpa!? Why didn't you use the precious copper plates properly!」

Zuro Tsun and the others had no words to defend themselves.

Even though they were facing their imminent demise, they still couldn't accept reality and could only hang their head low in silence.

All the house heads were a little startled as they looked at each other.

After a brief moment, the head of the Zaza house finally said:

「It's difficult for us to mete out punishment based on the severity of the crimes. In that case, it is only appropriate for us to punish all the main house and branch house members.」

「That would be too rash. We can't take the lives of 40 people so lightly... Donda Wu, what are your thoughts about this?」

When he heard Dali Sauti's question, Donda Wu turned silent for a while.

He then swept his gaze over all the Tsun clan members, and said in a heavy tone:

「... I had been interrogating the Tsun clan for their crimes since a decade ago. My father did the same two decades ago. But the kins of the Tsun clan, Zaza and Jean houses, kept defending the Tsun clan and ignored our advice... If not for their meddling, my father would have lopped off Zattsu Tsun's head twenty years ago.」

The head of the Zaza house bit his lips in regret.

「I have nothing to say about that now... But what has that got to do with this matter?」

「It is difficult for the Tsun clan to redeem themselves. Especially the despicable eldest and second son. However, who are the ones that allowed the tribal chief clan to fall into such depravity? Be it the Zaza clan defending them, the Wu clan failing to prosecute them— or the minor houses being too powerless to do anything about this, we are all responsible, correct?」

Donda Wu's eyes burned with quiet passion for the first time.

「Aside from the former clan head Zattsu Tsun and the current clan head Zuro Tsun, I want to give a chance to the rest of the Tsun clan.」

「A chance?」

「Yes. The last chance to live properly as a denizen of Forest's Edge... Assuming they have the resolve to do so.」

We sat in a spot where we could see the Ceremonial Hall and chatted mindlessly as we staved off the urge to sleep.

「I might be wrong about Donda Wu. I thought he was inflexible and stubborn, just like the head of the Zaza house.」

As for the conclusion made by Donda Wu:

The Wu clan and powerful houses such as the Zaza will take in the members of the Tsun clan's main house and treat them as family.

And of course, it wasn't a simple matter of letting them marry in. They had to discard their Tsun family name, break off ties with their family, and start to work from the lowest rung of the household.

The members of the Tsun clan who were deemed as reformed would receive the family name of the house they were assigned to.

If they weren't acknowledged, they wouldn't even have the chance to leave behind offsprings, and could only wait for their death.

Despite the harsh conditions set by Donda Wu, this was an unprecedented route to redemption in Forest's Edge.

Not just the Zaza and Sauti house, all the house heads couldn't hide their complicated feelings. In the end, they accepted Donda Wu's proposal.

「Donda Wu isn't a person who placed too much emphasis on rules and customs. In fact, he is the type who will do all he can to match his feelings with the rules.」

Ai Fa narrowed her eyes as if she felt the sun was too bright as she answered. Or maybe she was just getting drowsy.

「But after such a huge uproar in Forest's Edge, it's really surprising how it was all resolved without bloodshed.」

「That's right, it's a load off my mind.」

It had not been decided where each of the Tsun clan members were to head. The Dom house already decided to take in the dangerous pair, Diga Tsun and Doddoo Tsun. Amongst the northern houses, the Dom house was exceptionally fierce and strong, so these two would definitely participate in hunting as part of the Dom house.

「This isn't different from a death sentence for those retards.」

I had no answer after hearing Ludo Wu's quiet words. However, this was much better than being scalped or cutting off their right arms.

I was so agitated that I wanted to kill them last night, but now that Ai Fa was safe, I didn't wish for them to die.

However, I sincerely hoped that I would never see them again.

「Which house will Mida Tsun and Yamiel Tsun join? Only houses that are powerful enough can take them in.」

「Who knows, maybe they will join the Wu clan?」

「Huh?」

I turned my head in a puzzled way when I heard Ai Fa's unhappy voice. She was looking at me coldly with narrowed eyes.

「... Asuta, just how many naked bodies of girls do you want to see?」

「Ehh? That's what you are concerned about!? There's nothing good about bloodied naked bodies!」

「So it will be good if there is no blood?」

「That's not what I mean! What if other people hear you!? You are the only one I have seen naked!」

She elbowed my temple.

At this moment, a bulky figure approached us.

「What are you doing? I think I heard something about nakedness?」

「That hurts... No, it's nothing. What's the matter, Dali Sauti?」

「No, I'm just taking a break. There're piles of things for me to do before I can return to the Sauti village.」

Indeed, there were many tasks.

Deciding where the Tsun clan main house members would go.

Choosing what to do about the branch house members.

Taking care of the food store filled with fruits and vegetables from the forest.

Inspecting the condition of the forest that had been ravaged.

And — the sentencing of Zattsu Tsun and Zuro Tsun.

「We won't punish them right away. We will need to figure out how Zuro Tsun communicated with Genos. As for Zattsu Tsun— no matter what happens, he only has a few months left.」

「I see...」

The denizens of Forest's Edge stripped the Tsun clan of their authority as tribal chief, and the three clans had taken over this position.

How would Genos react after learning this?

The new tribal chiefs were different from the Tsun clan by being proud denizens of Forest's Edge. Could they maintain this correct relationship with the authorities of Genos?

They had new challenges awaiting them too.

「Regarding that thing I mentioned, I will be counting on you.」

「Okay. The people in Rock city went as far as to twist the laws to cover up for the denizens of Forest's Edge, how retarded. Just thinking about the way the people in the Post Station Town had been looking at us leaves a bad taste in my mouth.」

Dali Sauti hit his palm with his fist.

「Assaulting travelers, abducting women and robbing crops— did the Tsun clan really commit these crimes?」

「I'm not sure. The branch house members were probably powerless to commit such atrocities. The main house members are now restricted, so if such rumors don't appear in the future, that means these all were the doings of the Tsun clan.」

「If the rumors are true, then the punishment of the eldest and second son will be too light... Never mind, becoming a Dom house member is already a heavy sentence.」

Just how harsh was the Dom house?

They were quieter than the Zaza and Jean houses, and the kiba skull worn by the Dom house head was also exceptionally scary.

「As for the branch house member Tay Tsun, I will suggest letting the Dom house take him in too.」

「Ehh? Really?」

「Yes. Since he had no other family, he was living with the main house. In that case, we should treat him in the same way as the main house members... I heard he is the father of Aura Tsun, the wife of the clan head.」

I was dumbstruck.

That meant Tay Tsun was the father-in-law of Zuro Tsun and grandfather to Zwei Tsun.

The main house members were actually ordering someone like that around.

Even after everything had ended, I still felt as if I was staring into the abyss.

「... Even so, it is a kind of bliss for him that he can hunt again at the tail end of his life. The eldest and second son never had the pride of being a hunter before. But Tay Tsun must have lived as a hunter in the past.」

That's right. He was already older than 50 and probably devoted himself to hunting kiba during his youth.

But the Tsun clan robbed his glory as a hunter from him— what a tragedy.

What kind of feelings did he harbor as he followed the instructions of Diga Tsun and the others? Before his eyes turned dead, what kind of person was he?

I felt a pain in my chest as I thought about all that.

「Donda Wu must have considered that when he announced his wish to give those guys a final chance. It's vexing, but the leadership of the Zaza house head and me couldn't match that of Donda Wu.」

Dali Sauti turned.

「To avoid making the same mistake and repeating this tragedy, we have to show a correct path for the denizens of Forest's Edge... Asuta and Ai Fa of the Fa house, let us meet again.」

「Alright, see you.」

I bade farewell to him, but Ai Fa remained silent.

Speaking of which, she had been quiet since just now. As I was about to turn my head, Ai Fa's head bumped onto my right shoulder.

She seemed to have dozed off while Dali Sauti was talking with me.

Never mind, it couldn't be helped. She only slept for two or three hours last night. Adding the commotion that happened after that, everyone was exhausted.

Despite that, we still need to finish our own jobs.

Starting tomorrow, we will continue opening shop in the Post Station Town.

I still needed to prepare the ingredients later.

My body wouldn't be able to take it if I didn't rest properly. With that in mind, I leaned onto Ai Fa and closed my heavy eyelids.



Mid-meal Snack - Silver Vase

A caravan galloped through the wilderness, heading into the west from the east.

The group had five carriages, with two Totos pulling each one. Dark-skinned people of the Eastern Kingdom Semu sat on the driver seats of these carriages, with their hands on the reins.

They were members of the 《Silver Vase》 merchant group.

The young band leader Shumimaru Jiz Sadumutino sat in the cargo compartment of the first carriage and watched the scenery outside the window quietly.

The sun was about to set.

Light from the evening sun was red, illuminating the uninhabited border's barren lands.

The dried grounds were cracked and the vegetation was withered. The grace of nature couldn't be expected here. If one continued to go south, an even more barren and hot desert zone awaited them. This was unclaimed barren land, and even the greedy people from rock cities had abandoned this place.

The caravan's carriages traversed along sand filled paths that couldn't really be called roads. People unfamiliar with the place would trip the Totos over stones that jut out of the ground or run the carriage into rocks and be stranded immediately.

But they were experienced travelers.

The 《Silver Vase》 would make an annual trek across this dangerous path and head for the western kingdom Selva.

There were basically two routes leading from Semu to Selva. One was through the borders of the northern kingdom Mahildra, the other was through the free barren lands through the south.

The northern route was well-paved, but bandits roamed there. Threats from humans were infrequent on the southern path, but nature itself was the biggest enemy. Both routes were similar in terms of danger, but ever since the 《Silver Vase》 was founded generations ago, this caravan has learned to compete with nature instead of bandits.

However, these barren lands weren't completely devoid of bandits either.

It had been a long time since they last experienced that themselves.

「Shumimaru.」

The youth on the driver's seat held onto the reins and said to him.

「Yes.」

Shumimaru leaned out.

Several dark figures with their backs to the half-sunken disk of flame were approaching them.

It was a group of bandits mounted on Totos.

There were about ten of them, and a few of them were wielding silver colored sabers.

As they came from the direction the 《Silver Vase》 was heading towards, Shumimaru's group couldn't escape. Besides, the Totos couldn't shake off these bandits with its heavy load. Shumimaru pondered for a moment and instructed his comrades to stop the carriages.

「Ohh? You guys are sensible merchants. If you stay there obediently, we won't take your lives.」

The bandits spread out and surrounded the five carriages.

A man with an incredibly bulky figure trotted away with a saber in hand.

He was a citizen of the west with curly brown hair.

He wore a coat that was a little dirty, had a sash around his waist, and hung a pouch and bottle from his leather belt. His Totos was controlled nimbly, suggesting that he might be ex-mercenary.

Shumimaru stood up from the side of the driver's seat, facing the man who appeared to be the boss of the bandits.

「You, north, from?」

「What? Do we look like Mahindra people? Do you people interact with that barbaric race?」

「I not, mean that. I know, you westerner. I want ask, you come, from north area.」

「What a weird fellow! Never mind, since you can speak the language of the west, you are probably a higher class of Semu!」

That man laughed, and despicable laughter of flattery came from the surroundings.

Shumimaru looked at them expressionlessly.

「You, skin red. So, I think, you just reach south. Westerner born south, skin yellow.」

「So what? Are you stalling for time? The guards won't come to this forsaken land, it's useless to drag for time, you know?」

「This zone, few bandits, attack Semu. We ten, you ten. Bandits normal, avoid us.」

「... Huh? What are you saying?」

「Need five, one Semu, to attack. Us, you, 50, need.」

「Uwah!」

At the moment Shumimaru declared that fact, the bandit boss suddenly fell over backward.

He collapsed just like that, and the Totos that lost its owner tilted its long neck in quizzically.

「B-Boss? What happened!？」

「What the hell did you do!？」

The rest of the bandits swung their weapons around.

Shumimaru remained unmoved and slowly continued:

「Semu, unarmed, are not.」

Three men fell from their Totos, as if they were competing who would fall faster.

Shumimaru's companions were attacking with some type of blow dart.

The tip of the dart was covered with Banagiuzu, which had an anesthetic effect.

「Left 6. You, robbery, give up?」

Shumimaru asked quietly.

「All of you knock out, danger. If no rescue, night in borders, might die.」

Yet another man fell.

The remaining 5 guys shouted in a panic:

「T-They are shamans from Semu!」

「We will be cursed if we go near them!」

The easterners were proficient in using medicine and poison herbs, so the westerners and southerners feared them, and thought they were shaman or magicians. This group of westerners finally remembered such rumors.

「I kill, don't wish. If robbery, give up, comrade take and leave.」

The remaining bandits looked as if they were about to flee, so Shumimaru told them that.

After being poisoned with Banagiuzu, they wouldn't be able to move for half a day or so. If left alone, the five who fell would spend the night here defenseless.

「Hope, you live properly. Your god, your life, will protect.」

The pale-faced man started tending to their fallen comrades while staying wary of Shumimaru's group.

They grabbed the reins of the riderless Totos and fled to the north.

「We go.」

On Shumimaru's orders, the five carriages set off again.

His young companion turned to Shumimaru with his hands still on the reins:

「Westerners, many bandits. No live properly, why they?」

In order to learn the western language quickly, the members of 《Silver Vase》 refrained from speaking in their mother tongue as much as possible.

「They probably, job no find. So by robbing, make living.」

「West Kingdom, east kingdom, bigger than. But job, no find?」

「Yes, so always, they, for land, fight.」

Since ancient times, the Western Kingdom of Selva had been warring with the Northern Kingdom Mahildra for territory.

The Eastern Kingdom Semu and Southern Kingdom Jaguar still couldn't build a cordial relationship. Shumimaru's group lived in a plain far from the borders, so they weren't too concerned with this fact. But these two nations were currently at war.

「... Time wasted. Hurry, go.」

They advanced towards the sun that was sinking towards the horizon and kept galloping in the wilderness.

They still had to journey for five days before they could reach the entrance to the Western Kingdom Selva—the border city Genos.

Shortly after the caravan repelled the bandits, dusk slowly shrouded the vicinity. The merchant group saw the light of a campfire in the darkness.

It was a huge bonfire. Although they would run into other travelers in this barren lands sometimes, a bonfire of this scale was unusual.

「What is that? A caravan from the west?」

Shumimaru didn't answer his comrade's question and stared into the darkness.

A large group of almost twenty people was preparing dinner.

「Please slow. Avoid, them, agitate.」

Shumimaru had doubts in his mind.

A short moment later, his doubts were proven right.

A man standing beside the bonfire lashed out in anger when he saw Shumimaru's group:

「You group of easterners there, what are you doing in our village!」

That man had brown hair, green eyes, reddish-white skin and a stout build.

They were citizens of the southern country Jaguar.

When hearing the voice of that man, many figures gathered in the darkness, with spears taller than their height in hand.

「We, the caravan 《Silver Vase》, we, west city, Genos, going.」

This area was unregulated by nations. Citizens from any country could come and go without following the laws of any nations. Hence, when people from hostile nations like the Semu and Jaguar run into each other, it could become very dangerous.

Besides, there were a hundred-odd Jaguar people here. If a commotion arose between the two sides, Shumimaru's group wouldn't be able to handle it with poison darts like before.

「You are a caravan? Hah! You travel through such problematic borders for the sake of business. I'm impressed by how far your greed drives you!」

The man who hollered in the beginning made no effort to hide his malice.

「This is our village! We will not let any easterners do as they please here! Go ask your black faced god, and decide if you will leave at once, or fight with us till the very end!」

「We, fight, not intend. We, just, go west, want.」

「Then stay away from our village! If you step within the bonfire, I will treat it as an invasion!」

Since this area was not under any country's jurisdiction, they couldn't threaten Shumimaru with that reason.

However, the people of Jaguar tended to be hot-blooded, and Shumimaru wasn't willing to engage in foolish arguments with them. He stirred the Totos towards the north instead.

They made a large detour around the circular bonfire and headed westward. The men from Jaguar held on their spears and watched every move of Shumimaru's group.

「Shumimaru, center of circle, several houses.」

His comrade muttered under his breath.

「Didn't realize, here, erect village. Half a year, we pass this road, no village.」

「Yes, probably, this half year, built.」

「Why? Jaguar land, south of desert, further. This place, danger. Bandits, venom bugs, man-eating lizards... And barren land.」

「Yes. But here, water source. With time, can farm.」

As there was water around here, Shumimaru wanted to camp here.

「They, old place, exiled. So this place, new home.」

「Then our journey, arduous.」

Once they put up a wall, the Semu people would have a more difficult time traversing this region.

However, Shumimaru wasn't too worried about it.

「Dangerous, if no wall, be erect. But impossible, not so strong, they be. We just, detour, need.」

It was extremely difficult to build a village with just one hundred-odd people. Shumimaru thought it was impossible for them to build a wall for their village. They would need the blessings of their gods just to make it through the day.

They must have chosen such a life because of some incident. Maybe the war between the east and the south caused them to lose their homes. With that in mind, maybe it was the will of Semu for Shumimaru's group to meet them.

「We go far, no see bonfire, then stop. Then, at ease, both sides.」

They moved quietly with lit torches. As the place was barren, there wasn't any place to hide. After the Totos ran for a while longer, the bonfire from the village was no longer visible.

「Around here. We camp.」

Shumimaru's group stopped after reaching the shade of a boulder that jutted out like the lower jaw of a beast.

They untied the Totos, hammered steel pins into the ground, then tied ropes to these pins. The five carriages surrounded the campsite, and they built a fire in the middle. The ten members of the caravan did their assigned tasks and set up camp swiftly.

「We, no replenish water. Less water, use.」

After hearing what Shumimaru said, the companions in charge of dinner nodded.

They were scheduled to reach the next water source tomorrow afternoon. If they ran into any mishaps, their lives would be threatened. So it was the right call for Shumimaru to reduce water usage.

After putting rocks at the four corners of the campfire, they placed a giant pot on it.

They added an adequate amount of water and put three types of ingredients in.

Which were Gyama jerky, dried aria, and Minzu beans.

Gyama was a beast that dwelled in the Semu region.

Aria was a nutritious vegetable, grown not just in Semu, but Selva and Jaguar too.

Minzu was a bean grown in the grass plains of Semu.

People from Selva and Jaguar treated cereals such as fuwano and poitan as their staple food, but the main staple in the central region of Semu was Minzu beans. To avoid spoilage, the Minzu beans would be grilled. When someone wanted to eat them, the beans were to be added to boiling water, and doing this returned the Minzu beans back to their tender state. When Semu people camped outdoors, they would often cook this food with Chitto to make them spicy.

「Shumimaru, please enjoy.」

After the dinner was done and served onto plates, the first plate was offered to the band leader Shumimaru.

Shumimaru sat on a cushion and received the plate with thanks. He then scooped up the soup with his spoon.

It was a spicy bowl of soup, and the crushed Chitto fruit dyed the entire thing red.

The saltiness of the Gyama jerky gave the soup flavor. As they added less water today, the taste was heavier than usual.

After taking a bite of jerky, the strong taste of saltiness spread in his mouth.

When his tongue was tired, he would moisten his mouth with Gyama kumis⁸ in place of water.

After a hard day of work, he could feel all sort of nutrients being absorbed into his exhausted body.

As the soup ingredients were all food that was focused on preservation, this soup wasn't delicious. The meat was as tough as roots, and fresh aria and Minzu beans would obviously be better than dried ones. If his body wasn't craving for nutrients, he wouldn't be able to eat this food.

『I hope the day we reach Genos will come sooner.』

8 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kumis>

Someone suddenly said that to him in their mother tongue.

It was the youngest member of the band. He had just joined the 《Silver Vase》 and still couldn't speak in western.

『It's tiring to eat such food for an entire month. I'm an easterner, but I'm starting to miss Kimyusu meat and Mamalia fruit wine.』

『Yes, I feel the same.』

After Shumimaru answered in mother tongue, the youth leaned forward.

『Although Genos is a prosperous city, the dishes sold in the shops are really crude. Do the restaurants in the castle town sell higher-grade food?』

『I don't know. I had never dined in the castle town before.』

『The Post Station Town and castle town in Genos are like two different worlds. I don't mind lodging in the Post Station Town, but can we buy some light meals in the castle town—』

『Hey.』

At this moment, another companion admonished him.

It was the vice band leader, Ladazjid Gi Nafasiaal.

『It's fine to think whatever you like, but you are showing too many emotions. Be careful.』

『Really? I thought I'm already very careful.』

The youth slapped his own face with his palms.

Ladazjid shook his head quietly.

『Your face is expressionless, but you revealed your emotions through your words. Semu is always watching you.』

Easterners thought that showing one's emotion was a shameful act.

The youth straightened his back and sat properly.

『We are going to Selva to obtain wealth. We need to bring the copper plates we earned back to Semu. Please avoid splurging. Dining in the castle town is not acceptable either.』

『Yes, I understand... But the food sold in the Post Station Town all taste so bland. They have a wide selection of meat and vegetables, but it feels as if something is missing.』

『The westerners are different from the easterners, they don't use many spices in their food, and just add salt for seasoning. Of course, you will think their food tastes bland.』

Ladazjid raised the plate in his hand up high.

『Even if the food in the Post Station Town tastes bland, it will still be better than dried aria and Minzu soup. If you think their food is tasteless, you can add some Chitto fruit yourself.』

『You are right.』

The youth expressed his agreement.

Even they found the accumulated fatigue from their journey hard to bear. After setting off from Semu, they had to ride on Totos every day and could only reach Genos after two months.

After the first month passed, they could only travel in barren places that were sparsely populated. Hence, they couldn't procure new stocks of food and could only eat the dry rations they brought along.

However, their tough journey should reach its end in another five days.

After reaching their first destination - Genos, they could travel between the cities, without need to camp outdoors. They would spend a few months touring the western lands and peddle the merchandise they brought from their homeland. That was how the 《Silver Vase》 led by Shumimaru lived.

One year later, they would return to their home nation, Semu.

The time they spent journeying was many folds that of the time spent in their home nation.

Many easterners of Semu lived such nomadic lives, especially the people from the plains. Many of them travelled alone or in groups to Selva or Mahildra, but not in caravans like Shumimaru's company. These Semu people wouldn't stay in one place and would keep drifting. Such a lifestyle did fit the people of the grass plains.

What kind of people will I meet during this journey?

Shumimaru thought to himself as he placed the empty plate back on the tray.

His comrades had also finished the humble rations before them.

『Alright then, let us rest. Those keeping watch, pay more attention to the east. Those Jaguar people might attack us.』

The band members spent this night peacefully, just like every other night before.

Four days later—

One day before reaching Genos, the barren landscape finally changed.

「Now we see, Morga Mountain.」

The companion holding the reins said with faint emotions in his voice.

At the edge of the west was a vast dark-green forest.

That was the secret realm with many legends and where no man roamed, the Morga Mountain.

Morga Mountain belonged to the western kingdom of Selva in name. But the citizens of Selva were forbidden from entering it. Ferocious beasts like Barb wolves, Madarama snakes and barbarians dwelled in the mountains. Legends said that if they tried to clear this mountain, the entire city would be destroyed.

The only exception was the human settlement in the forest at the foot of the mountain.

They were the denizens of Forest's Edge... This tribe abandoned Jaguar and converted to the western god Selva. They were the 『Untamed people』 — the hunters of Forest's Edge.

The denizens of Forest's Edge were filled with mysteries too.

They were said to be the mixed blood of Semu and Jaguar in ancient times, but that was a baseless legend. They once dwelled in the nameless 『dark jungle』 of Jaguar and cut themselves off from the outside world. Back then, they hunted the vicious man-eating apes and travelled in the jungles while wearing the hides of those apes, a barbaric race of unknown origin.

Four scores ago, the flames of war spread to the 『dark jungle』 and they lost their homes.

They were unwilling to stay in Jaguar as frontiersmen, so their entire tribe migrated to the foot of the Morga Mountain. They willingly changed the god they worshiped and moved to the land in the west.

The denizens of Forest's Edge didn't seem to consider themselves as part of the four nations. Their god was the forest. Hence, they had no qualms in deserting the southern gods and adopting the western one.

The people feared the denizens of Forest's Edge.

And the denizens of Forest's Edge were indeed fearsome.

They lived at the foot of the Morga Mountain and hunted kiba, which was seen as a sign of disaster in the past. They showed their terrifying prowess to the people in the city.

They ate kiba meat and peddled kiba tusks, horns, and pelt in exchange for provisions. The people from the city actually believed that the denizens of Forest's Edge absorbed the powers of the ferocious kiba and made themselves more violent and strong.

The members of the 《Silver Vase》 could now see the legend-filled Morga Mountain appear in the west.

The Genos city lay to the west of Morga Mountain.

They just needed another day and a half to traverse the southern edge of the mountains, and they would finally reach civilized lands for the first time in a month.

「Please be careful, keep guard up.」

「Yes.」

As they followed the unpaved road forward, their surroundings gradually turned into yellowish rocky grounds. It wasn't clear if this was just their imagination, but the air also seemed more humid.

The Totos had run for half a day, and the sun was starting to set when the majestic view of the Morga Mountain appeared before them.

And now, we just needed to have a good rest, set off on the Totos the next morning, and we would reach Genos before dusk tomorrow - Shumimaru thought as he signaled for the other carriages to stop.

At this moment, one of 《Silver Vase》 members jumped off a carriage and walked towards Shumimaru.

「Shumimaru, stars shifted.」

He was the oldest member of the caravan and had been a part of the 《Silver Vase》 since the time of Shumimaru's father.

He was an excellent astrologer.

「Stars, where, move?」

「Red stars of calamity, block our way. Disaster beckons tonight.」

The astrologer raised his right arm as he muttered quietly.

He pointed his bony finger towards the dark forest.

「Disaster from north, strike. Famished fangs, crimson rage, danger.」

「Famished fangs... kiba, attack?」

It was said that the hungry kiba would often leave the forest and attack the farms in Genos. Even the brave hunters of Forest's Edge couldn't eradicate all the kiba inside the vast forest at the foot of the mountain.

But they had never heard of kiba attacking travelers. Compared to meat, kiba preferred fruits and vegetables. It was also their nature to shun humans.

「Don't know. But Morga Mountain is north, danger.」

Shumimaru's caravan was on their way through the south of the Morga Mountain, so the dense forest was naturally to their north. Since this place was treacherous, they could only choose either to strive forth or retreat.

「I see. Go south, farm village. Danger there? 」

「Danger. No refuge in south.」

The entire world was basking in the setting sun.

Be it advance or retreat, night would fall during their travel. Although they were proficient in driving Totos, it was still too dangerous to force march in the night.

「Understand, we—」

Before Shumimaru could finish, a terrifying howl came from the north.

It was a low howl of a beast from afar.

The same howl echoed from other directions, as if they were answering each other.

The howl was fierce, as if they were the cheers of evil gods that had been liberated after being sealed for centuries.

「Kiba howling. I heard this, twenty years ago.」

With those words, that comrade returned to his carriage.

They had no time to hesitate. Shumimaru instructed his companions to continue their advance.

At this instant, an ugly beast charged out from the shadows of the boulders to the north.

「Pew! 」

His comrade quickly shot a poisoned dart. The beast let out a muffled grunt and collapsed on the rocks.

It had a round body, slender legs, large diamond-shaped ears and a flat snort— short light yellow fur covered its ugly body. It was about the size of a human child.

It wasn't a kiba, but Munto that preyed on rotten meat.

Munto would forage for rotten meat in the forest and was one of the dangerous beasts that dwelled in the foot of the Morga Mountain.

Did the kiba's howl spooked the Munto and sent them running from the forest?

As he was wondering about that, about half a dozen figures leaped out from the boulders. Their crimson eyes shone as they stood opposite the setting sun.

『Advance!』

Shumimaru shouted as he snatched the whip from his companions and hit the Totos' waist.

Munto normally feasted on rotten meat and only attacked the living when they were famished. In a sense, they were as dangerous as kiba. As the Munto's legs were not as developed as kiba's, they couldn't sprint like them. Even a Totos laden with cargo could shake them off.

「Totos driver, switch. Prepare fire.」

Shumimaru took the reins from his comrade who asked:

「Prepare fire?」

「Yes, fire. Put up, two torches. Totos will keep going, until danger gone.」

『The sun is setting soon.』

His companion was too tense to speak in western and spoke in his mother tongue as he retreated to the carriage.

「So, torches, we need. Tell others.」

If the astrologer of 《Silver Vase》 was right, they were in danger until reaching the west side of the Morga Mountain. Instead of setting up camp and worrying about attacks from kiba and Munto, it was safer to continue traveling on their Totos.

Such situations will happen on a journey.

Shumimaru's group had experienced something even more terrible in the past. Hence, when he swung his whip at the Totos, his heart was filled with hope, not despair.

The next morning... In the end, Shumimaru's group traversed the southern end of the Morga Mountain the entire night.

They entered the territory of Genos after passing through the foot of the Morga Mountain and reached the stone-paved road. This wide road built from stone meandered through the world from north to south.

To their left were the bountiful farmlands, and to the right was the Morga Mountain's range. They looked up at the majestic mountains and proceeded north, and rows of wooden buildings appeared on both sides of the road. This was the Genos city's Post Station Town.

The sun rose slowly, and the Post Station Town welcomed Shumimaru's group just like during their previous visit

「Everyone, safe? 」

Shumimaru got off the driver's seat at the entrance of the city, then turned towards his comrades. One companion got off each of the four carriages, and all of them were clearly exhausted, but calm. One especially tall member—the vice band leader Ladazjid asked:

「We reach, early half day. What do? 」

「For inn, head. When prepare ready, shop tomorrow, open . Today rest. 」

The Post Station Town forbade Totos from running within its boundaries. Shumimaru and the rest stepped inside Genos with their reins in hand.

There was still some time before noon, and people on the streets were sparse. But few inns were already open. Women with baskets of dirty laundry and men doing door-to-door sales could be seen too.

The peaceful scene before them made the previous night's panic feel like a dream.

Genos was very far from the enemy nation Mahildra. Hence, life in this city was prosperous and they never had any large-scale conflicts. There were even strong-looking guards protecting this city. Genos was one of the richest city in the region, so defense against banditry was a major concern.

The outskirts of the Post Station Town and the farming village nearby weren't covered by walls but were patrolled by guards around the clock. Although Genos was the border city furthest from the western capital, it was an important trading hub.

This placed used to be shunned.

Two centuries ago, this zone was still part of the unclaimed territory. Back then, there were just a few hundred westerners planting aia and poitan in their farms and barely scraping through.

However, there was a large river flowing from the Morga Mountain hidden here. When the locals discovered its existence, frontiersmen from other regions were despatched here. And before long, the Genos city was founded.

After that, the road in this area became paved, and a large swath of farmlands was developed to the north and south of the Genos city, which drew in people from everywhere. A hundred-odd years later, this giant city that didn't feel like it belonged to the borders was built.

Another hundred years later, Genos became a crucial trading hub.

And now, many merchants from Semu and Jaguar visited this place, making this city even more prosperous and lively. As the Semu and Jaguar people were forbidden from causing any trouble within the western realm, this city became one of the places where citizens from both nations could cohabit peacefully.

Hence, Shumimaru liked Genos.

Shumimaru's group came from the grass plains where people didn't compete with each other, so they felt at ease in this place.

Even when Shumimaru's group from the east walked on the streets, no one would cast strange gazes upon them. Even when encountering Jaguar people, their interaction wouldn't escalate past an unfriendly glare.

「Shumimaru.」

Someone diagonally behind him called out.

He turned and found Ladazjid looking another way.

Following his gaze, Shumimaru saw three figures coming out from the alley to the east.

They were three women with brown hair and light dark skin. Clothes with swirly patterns covered their soft bodies, and all three wore translucent shawls. They were women from the Forest's Edge.

The older one was leading two younger girls.

These denizens from the Morga Mountain had quiet and determined expressions. There was nothing unusual with their appearance, but there was an almost feral air about them.

The people in town weren't bothered by Shumimaru's group, but they were visibly tense when they saw the three women. Compared to foreigners like Shumimaru, the denizens of Forest's Edge residing in the west looked more out-of-place, be it the hunters or the women.

The Forest's Edge women went off to the north briskly.

Probably, they were here to buy ingredients from the food stalls. Genos prohibited the denizens of Forest's Edge from plucking fruits and vegetables from the forest, so they had to make frequent trips to the Post Station Town and trade in tusks, horns, and hides for food.

However, Shumimaru's group didn't make any effort to avoid the denizens of Forest's Edge.

The westerners treated the denizens of Forest's Edge as unfathomable aliens, while the southerners thought of them as traitors who abandoned the southern god. But the easterners had no reason to avoid the denizens of Forest's Edge. The easterners treated the grass plains,

mountain ranges, and the sky as gods, so they weren't surprised to see the denizens of Forest's Edge revere the forest as a god.

In order to continue doing business in Genos, I shouldn't approach them lightly.

Shumimaru thought to himself as he headed down an alley leading to the west.

He continued based on his memories and saw a familiar signboard.

The 《Cryptic Venerable Inn》 was an inn that wasn't too large, and Shumimaru's group lodged there periodically.

「Boss, long time never see.」

「Ah, it's the guests from the 《Silver Vase》 ... So it is already the season for you to visit.」

The innkeeper made a gesture with his fingers, which was the way Semu people greeted each other. The innkeeper's name was Neil, and he was a strange man. Despite being a westerner, he was passionate about the culture of the east.

「There would be ten guests this time too, correct? How long will you be staying?」

「We, until blue month end, stay. Vacant rooms, any?」

「A large group just left this morning, I will prepare two large rooms for you.」

「Thank you. Cargo, put here?」

「Yes, this way please.」

Ushered by Neil, they left the inn and moved to the back of the building. There was a large warehouse which was locked. It wasn't large for an inn, but for the 《Silver Vase》 laden with luggage, this was a convenient store.

Shumimaru let the Totos pull the five carriages into the warehouse, then turned to his comrades.

『Before we rest, we need to prepare for the shop opening tomorrow. Ladazjid, apply for a sales permit in the marketplace, and check if the entry pass into the castle town is still valid.』

For the sake of the 《Silver Vase》 members who were still unfamiliar with western tongue, Shumimaru instructed in their mother tongue:

『Deposit the Totos into the stables on the way there. Five people will accompany Ladazjid, the other three will sort the merchandise with me.』

『Understood.』

Ladazjid's group of six brought the ten Totos out of the warehouse.

Shumimaru and three others stayed behind to sort the wares they would be peddling in the castle town and the Post Station Town.

Five carriages full of merchandise was a huge amount. The goods were already sorted according to carriages, but they still needed to spend some effort to tidy up the wares. Their stamina was at their limits.

「Shumimaru, kitchen knife, castle town?」

「Yes. We, Semu knife, in Post Station Town, no sell.」

Semu steel was precious, and the knife was expensive. Even though life in Genos was prosperous, there was an enormous gulf between the Post Station Town and castle town. It was the same for accessories, they would sell the silver adornments in the castle town and peddle the horns of Gyama and stone accessories in the Post Station Town.

It's almost done...

A moment later, Shumimaru exited the warehouse after finishing the categorization with his companions. They closed the heavy doors and locked it with a pad.

No one would think that the goods to be sold in the castle town would be stored in a warehouse within the Post Station Town. But they were still worried about thieves and set a trap with poison herbs. If anyone were to touch the wares without permission, they would be poisoned by Banagiuzu and sleep for half a day.

Shumimaru was satisfied with his work and returned to the 《Cryptic Venerable Inn》.

The innkeeper was already back on the counter, and he intentionally kept a poker face as he nodded at the Semu men.

「Thank you for your hard work. Are you heading to your room to rest?」

「Yes. But before rest, business first.」

Shumimaru made a gesture, and a comrade placed a large bundle on the counter.

Neil smiled, but realized it and showed a poker face. He seemed to practice the Semu way of concealing one's emotion in real life too.

「I promised, castle noble, sell much food. So this is few, sorry.」

「Not at all, this amount is good enough.」

Inside the bundle was Semu ingredients such as Chitto fruit.

And now, Shumimaru's group could taste Semu-styled dinner in the inn too.

Although the quality and quantity weren't satisfactory, Neil was still very pleased. After all, such expensive spices and foodstuff wouldn't sell in the Post Station Town.

The Post Station Town had a wide selection of meat and vegetables, so the citizens didn't really crave delicious food. Compared to the other cities, the food culture was plentiful enough. But easterners preferred stronger seasoning and were a little unhappy with the plain taste of the food in Genos.

However, they brought this merchandise all the way from Semu and had no intentions of lowering the price. The Jaguar merchants felt the same way too. So both parties would sell all the expensive ingredients in the castle town.

The residents of the Post Station Town live a prosperous life. No other city in the border region could afford for the normal citizenry to eat Karon and Kimyusu as they wished... And the nobles living beyond these rock walls are living a luxurious life that the residents of the Post Station Town can't even imagine.

According to the laws, the residents of the Post Station Town couldn't step into the castle town. Hence, they didn't know how lavished the life of the nobles was due to the resident's effort.

On the other hand, after Shumimaru got acquainted with a Genos noble by chance, he obtained an entry pass that granted him access to the castle town. It was the most basic of entry passes, so he could only enter the castle town during the day and couldn't spend the night there. However, he had a good grasp about the life within the rock walls.

It's impossible for a Semu city to have such incredible disparity in wealth. Furthermore, the denizens of Forest's Edge that the people in the city fear as barbarians are also living here. It will be hard to find another city as abnormal in the west.

Shumimaru liked Genos. Therefore, the strange atmosphere and customs in this city worried him.

This city was a little twisted.

Would it be corrected? Could this city provide equality to everyone in their pursuit of happiness? His heart was filled with such worries.

I'm just a foreigner, there's no point in thinking about such things...

When Shumimaru's train of thought reached this point, someone opened the door of the inn strongly.

He turned and saw the six comrades who went out to the city standing at the entrance.

『What's the matter? Your movements are too unrefined.』

When he saw his young companion standing before him, Shumimaru admonished him in their mother tongue.

『I beg your pardon.』

The youth apologized, then approached Shumimaru.

His face was calm, but his eyes showed the light of excitement.

Ladazjid and the others appeared shaken too.

『Is something wrong? Could it be... The entry pass is invalid? 』

《 Silver Vase 》 possessed an entry pass issued in the name of a noble. If that noble lost his standing, the pass would be invalidated.

『There are no problems with the entry pass.』

The youth shook his head.

『In that case, why is Ladazjid also so flustered? This is not like you at all.』

『I looked flustered? I'm ashamed.』

It was a very subtle change, so the westerners definitely couldn't tell the difference. But Shumimaru was their comrade, so they couldn't hide it from him. Their expressions were calm, but they were obviously flustered.

『To be honest, we ate a surprising dish.』

The youth said.

『I never imagined that I would taste such food in the Post Station Town of Genos.』

『Did you try the dish from a food stall? I'm looking forward to that. I'm so exhausted from last night that I still can't eat anything now.』

Shumimaru answered in a little surprised tone, and the youth shook his head again.

『Do try it tomorrow. It is an incredible dish. And they used kiba meat as an ingredient.』

『Kiba meat? Only denizens of the Forest's Edge will eat that, correct? 』

『Yes. The stall owners are from the Forest's Edge... However, one of them is a westerner in Forest's Edge garment.』

That made Shumimaru dumbfounded.

A westerner in Forest's Edge clothings made food from kiba meat and was selling it in a stall inside Genos— that was unbelievable.

『... If what you say is true, I will want to try it.』

『Yes, please do. You can then understand our surprise.』

Shumimaru watched his companions in silence and felt a stir in his chest.

Maybe Shumimaru felt that way because either the god of the east or west was sending a premonition of the revolution that was coming.